

Reincarnated as the Last of my Kind

3



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Reincarnated as the Last of my Kind

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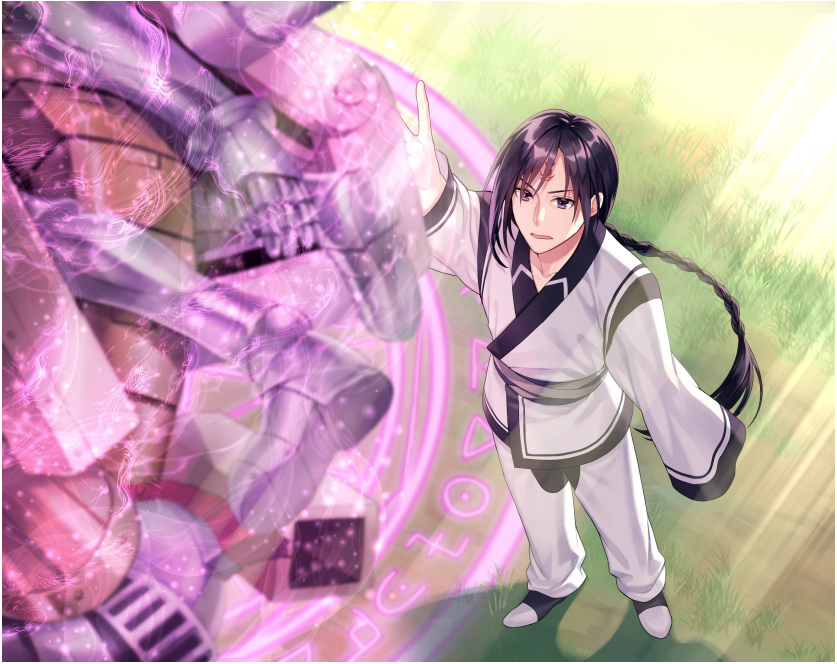
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♣Me at Age Thirteen

“HAPPY BIRTHDAY, Tina!”

“Happy birthday!”

“Happy birthday, Big Sis Tinaris!”

“Th-Thank you!”

The soft sound of clapping filled the house, which stood illuminated even in the early evening gloom. Four months had passed since the incident at De Marl. And here we were, at my thirteenth birthday party.

Well...this really wasn't my birthday, per se. It'd been thirteen years since the day Dad found me, so it was probably well past my actual birthday...but that's just a technicality.

The most important thing was that on my twelfth birthday, I was only sharing this table with Dad and Nakona, but now we also had René, Moné, and the mysterious creature Mujimuji celebrating with us, too!

René wordlessly thrust a bouquet of Lilith, Duana, and Solan flowers at me. Apparently, this was his present.

Hehehe. You get it, don't you, you little tyke?

But still, “Big Sis Tinaris”, huh...? It's got such a lovely ring to it~! Every time I hear them say it, I squirm with joy.

If I'd known how nice it felt to be addressed like that, I would've called Nakona “Big Sis” a little more often! But I still felt a bit of resistance toward calling her that. After all, I'm older than her, mentally speaking. Thanks to that, I always felt out of my element when they made a grand affair of my birthday every year.

When I was still alive...well, in my past life, I was pretty poor. It'd be a relatively good birthday if I could eat some generic convenience store cake with Mom. But in this world, birthday celebrations were overblown family gatherings, like how Hollywood movies made it look in my old world.

The cake does look a bit shabby, but Moné and Nakona worked really hard on it! The way it looks is probably Moné's handiwork, but Nakona made the cream and sponge cake, so it tastes great!

Nakona was actually a pretty good cook. She was even better than me sometimes. *I probably have a long way to go as a chef.*

"Mm, it's good!"

"I'm so glad!" Moné rejoiced at my comment. "Guess what? Guess what? I spread the cream on it!"

That's what I thought!

"Really?" I asked, hiding the fact I'd guessed as much. "No wonder it looks so cute!"

"Yep!"

Not as cute as you, though, Moné!

"Tina's thirteen now..." Dad mumbled, his voice choked with tears. "They grow up so fast..."

"S-Stop making a big deal out of it, Dad!"

He's talking with tears in his eyes... He gets so emotional over the smallest things!

"Mujimuji!" Our small, strange pet rubbed against my legs and squeaked at me.

"Thanks, Mujimuji!"

This was apparently its way of celebrating my birthday, too. I still didn't have the first idea what Mujimuji was. We'd kind of all reached the tacit understanding that it was what it was, but...I couldn't help but wonder every now and then.

"Mm..." I hummed to myself pensively.

Still, I'm happy, all in all. I mean, I made it to thirteen. I brought my hands together in thanks. Getting to live up to today isn't trivial. So thank you, everyone who made this possible. I hope this happiness continues forever...

"Big Sis Tinaris, what are you praying for?" Moné asked me curiously.

"Hm...all sorts of stuff!"



AFTER the party, I took a bath like always and headed to my room in the attic. Renémoné and Mujimuji now occupied Grandpa's old room, so I'd now gotten used to telling them goodnight on the way there. Upon entering my room, I stretched a little and stood in front of the mirror.

I dried out my wet, long hair with a towel. Through my

disheveled locks, I looked at my features in the mirror. Crimson eyes. Long, pointy ears. The ends of my blonde hair gradually gained a purplish-red gradation. And while they weren't quite as long as an elf's ears, they were still too long to look human. I'd taken to cutting my bangs straight over my brows, so they hid the circlet on my forehead.

This circlet...is the one Renge made for me, and I've kept it on ever since.

"....."

He probably noticed the stone on my forehead. That's likely why he turned that pendant into a circlet and put it on my forehead. But how did he know? I was going to hide the stone on my forehead either way, so the circlet does help with that...but I don't know what his intentions were.

Or maybe the stone hadn't surfaced yet when Renge made the circlet. Maybe he just made it out of good will, to protect my forehead...?

Wait, huh? That's, like...really sweet of him. That means his heart's as golden as he is smoking hot...

"Ow..."

A pang of pain twinged through the stone in my forehead. It hurt like this from time to time. I took off the circlet and put it on my dresser.

Mm. It looks like the stone's surface is getting bigger.

I rubbed my fingertip over the stone in my forehead. It doesn't even feel like a normal stone. The pain's from the spot where the stone touches my skin. Is this its way of telling me it's growing?

No. Stop growing. Shrink! Or fall off!

"Tina, do you have a minute?"

There was a knock on the door, and Dad's voice called out to me from outside the room.

"Dad? Hm, yeah, one second."

I hurriedly put the circlet back on and wrapped the towel around my head. *They might be my family, but I still don't want them to know...* I mean, I didn't think Dad or Nakona would tell me to leave just because I'm a Spherit Folk. But with all the matters of alchemy on my mind, I didn't need more things troubling me.

"Sorry for the wait. What's...up?"

I opened the door and found Dad looking at me with an expression I'd never seen before. *Did something happen? The way he's*

looking at me is so...earnest. The atmosphere and his gaze were so different. It was a tension I could feel on my skin.

"Sorry for bothering you before you go to sleep. I just needed to talk to you about something."

"...Talk? *Uh...*"

What could it be? Dad's acting funny. For a moment, I wasn't sure if I wanted to let him inside. That's how unusual things felt.

"C-Can we talk on the balcony?" I asked.

"Yeah, it'd probably be better that way," he replied.

"Okay?"

It felt like it'd be stuffy with both of us in my room, which was why I proposed the balcony. And he accepted so easily... He even made it sound like he preferred things that way too, which struck me as odd...

He walked across the balcony's wooden deck and placed his hand on the railing. I took the towel off my head, letting the cold night breeze dry my hair.

"...That black thing in the sky...it's getting bigger," Dad said vaguely, looking up.

"Huh?" I said, raising my eyes to the heavens too. "Oh, yeah. It's kind of creepy..."

Between the sparkling stars and the round moon was the black dot that appeared a few months ago. It'd been getting larger and more conspicuous ever since. It really ruined the starry sky's beauty...

That black dot was visible day and night and seemed to be growing larger with every passing day. It was eerie, and I kept wondering what it was.

"Do you know what that thing is, Dad?" I asked.

"...I'm still half in doubt about it."

"W-Wait, you *actually* know?!"

But he's not sure...?

While Wisty Air doesn't have four seasons, it's chilly at night. Rofola's relatively westward, so it's fairly hot in comparison, but the wind was still cold...

"It's called the Predatory Star...Sugula."

"Sugula..."

For some reason, that name gave me a bad feeling. Dad's expression was strained with nervousness.

I clasped my hands together. *What he's about to say is going to*

change our lives in a big way. And I don't want that. Our lives are already changing too much, honestly. Some roads have been closed to travel, so we've had close to no customers lately. This is a very bad situation for an inn. But, still... I don't want change.

"Listen, Tina... This Sugula thing. Apparently, it's some kind of...giant monster that's growing larger in the sky," Dad said.

"H-Huh? I thought you were gonna say something about the inn," I stuttered.

"*Hmm?* N-No, that's not what this is about. We can talk about that tomorrow. That's important too, but...it's not what I'm talking about right now. No...I'm talking about Sugula."

"O-Oh, okay... So it's a monster in the— Wait, in the sky?!"

I looked up in surprise. *Yes, that thing's definitely in the sky... Or more like outer space. But a monster in outer space?!*

"That's a monster?!"

"Apparently... A certain someone told me about it recently, but I don't quite believe him yet. But just like he said, it's getting bigger and bigger by the day. And looking at it, I get the feeling what he said about it getting big enough to consume all of Wisty Air in five years' time isn't so far-fetched."

"What?! Consume...*all* of Wisty Air...? That thing? Up there in the sky?!"

I looked up again. And yes... What was only a tiny black speck a few months ago now looked as large as a marble. It was growing quickly.

B-But wait, it's going to get even bigger and swallow up Wisty Air? How does that work?!

Dad did say that he was half in doubt...

"When Sugula swallows up Wisty Air, all living things will become monsters and melt into the earth. And even if we somehow destroyed it in space, the Sugula is still a monster...and not just any monster. Destroying it would make Kaguya, which is even more dangerous than Kathra, fall down on us," Dad rattled off the facts like he was reciting something he was told.

"....."

"And the only thing that can prevent that...is the Stella."

"The Stella...?" I parroted.

The same power of miracles the Holy Woman was said to have used. But the Stella...had been lost since the Holy Woman died. Mister Giyaga told me about that before. Mister Sirius was

investigating the changes in the human continent from another angle and said we needed to find a different solution to fix things... But depending on some unclear power that may or may not exist wasn't really a solution.

To begin with, what's the point of telling this to a kid like me? I don't have any influence...

"Hey, Dad... Why are you telling me this?"

What does it have to do with me? I mean, I won't say the world getting eaten isn't my problem. It'll definitely affect me. But...developing potions and cultivating eve flowers is about the only thing I can do.

The next time Mister Giyaga stopped by, I would finally have all the ingredients for a high-grade tonic, which I planned to transmute by converting the mana it required into holy magic. That might even be the key to making a supreme tonic!

Basically, I had a lot of things I wanted to do. But if Dad was going to suggest we temporarily close up the inn and go looking for the Stella...

"...Yeah. Tina, you see..." Dad started.

"Y-Yes?"

What if that really is what he's thinking? If he says he needs to go on a journey to save the world, I can't really stop him. But he can't go alone. We'll have to arrange things so we can ask Shida or Aaron to join Dad next time they stop by. But I could see Nakona insisting on coming along, too. And that'd leave the inn undefended...

"Someone told me that...if you're a Spherit Folk, you can carry and control the power of the Stella... What do you think?"

"....."

...COME AGAIN?!

A cold chill ran through me. My knees buckled. Everything went dark, and it felt like my field of vision was warping. I broke into a nervous sweat and gripped my pajamas' sleeves in a bad attempt to hide it. I forced a smile—a very awkward, unsightly one—and managed to speak up.

"H-Huh? I'm a...what...? Spherit Folk? What's a Spherit Folk?" I asked, pretending not to know.

"A race of demi-humans that have Spherit Stones in their forehead. Their Spherit Stones can contain the Stella's power more safely than a human body can. And they can wield it more potently than any human."

“R-Really...?”

“The Stella is a kind of divine power. If a normal human or demi-human were to try to contain it inside themselves, they’d pollute their minds and destroy their personalities. Even if they were to try to contain it in a Spherit Stone, it’d contaminate their psyches before they could master it. But since Spherit Folk have Spherit Stones as part of their bodies, they’re more resistant to the Stella’s effects and use it better... Or so I’m told.”

“.....”

I hung my head. It wasn’t that I couldn’t stand to look at Dad anymore, but...

Calm down. I need to sort this out.

This Sugula thing is a giant monster in the sky that’s come to consume this world. The only thing that can stop it is the Stella...and the only ones who have the resistance needed to handle that power are the Spherit Folk...?

That’s...absurd!

I was shocked. Because, by that logic, I was the only one left alive who could do this as twelve—or rather, thirteen years ago now—the Spherit Folk went extinct, along with their kingdom.

“You’ve been wearing that circlet all the time recently, right?”

“...!” I gasped.

“No, it’s fine... If you want to live while hiding it, that’s your choice... I’ll stick by whatever you decide till the last minute.”

“.....”

“But I want you to keep this in mind. The man who told me about the Sugula and the Stella told me he’d wait six months. The month after next...two months from now, he wants an answer. So, you’ve got that long. I’ll respect whatever you decide, so you don’t need to worry about a thing. He won’t take you away against your will.”

Dad placed a hand on my head with his usual, gentle touch. “Go inside before you catch a cold,” he said, turning to leave.

No, wait... No, no, no...

“...Dad... H-How long have you—”

“Mm?”

“...N-No, forget it. Good night, Dad.”

“Yeah. Good night, Tina.”

I watched Dad leave the room and close the door behind him. But I stayed on the balcony. *So...this is what being stupefied feels like.*

I feel like I'm frozen in place. My legs are so stiff, I can't move.

The way Dad spoke...made it clear he suspects I'm a Spherit Folk. So he knew... Which honestly makes sense. We do live together, after all... Maybe Nakona already knows, too...

But when did he notice? The stone only surfaced on my forehead four months ago. Was it when I was asleep? I didn't sleep with my circlet on, after all...

My right hand raked over my forehead, my fingertips touching the circlet. The metal felt warm from my body heat. Maybe it doesn't matter if they found out. Dad is, well...Dad. He's nice. And Nakona might be surprised, but I don't think she'd tell me to leave... But then there's the matter of what Dad just told me...

"....."

Me? Take in the Stella? Absorb it and fight that big black dot in the sky? Ahaha... Is that some kind of bad joke?

"...No. I can't..."

It doesn't matter what anyone says. He told me to think it over, but...you know?

"...I'm going to bed."

Yes, sleep is good. I don't need to figure this out right now. Even Dad said so. I wobbled back into my room, threw the towel over the table, and dove into my bed. I pulled the covers over my head and burrowed inside.

They wanted me to use the Spherit Stone in my forehead to absorb the Stella. The Stella was that miraculous power that was said to be capable of healing any injury...and purifying the monsters. Saint Akari-Berz once possessed that power, but it was lost after she died.

Huh...? It can heal any injury? And purify the monsters...?

So it can heal missing limbs, just like the supreme tonic? And it can even heal diseases, which the supreme tonic can't. And purify monsters, which we can't really defeat...

Huh? Whaaat?

I sat bolt upright in bed.

Why am I so confused? What's the downside to this?

"It'd reveal that I'm a Spherit Folk, though... R-Right..."

Mm? But can't I just ask Dad to keep it a secret? I mean, I could hide the stone on my forehead with the circlet.

Thank you for everything, Mister Renge! Especially the circlet!

But can I really do something about monsters on my own...? Even

if I take in the Stella's power, can I really handle them by myself?

Uhh, I'm not so sure about this anymore...

I tried comparing the pros and cons.

The pros were:

1. I'd be able to purify monsters.
 2. I could heal Dad's arm and René's forehead.
- That, and I'd be able to cure diseases.

And the cons...?

1. I'd have to fight the monsters...

Though honestly, if I can do something about them, I probably should.

2. If other people found out I have the Stella, it'd draw a ton of attention to me.

“.....”

And standing out like that is...not a good idea. Dad mentioned mental pollution, too. But as a Spherit Folk, I should be resistant to it...

Hm... I don't know what to do! I guess I'll talk to Dad and think it over.

Yeah, that's what I'll do. Good night!



AND so came the next morning!

“Big Sis Tinariiiiis!” Moné called out to me. “Hey, look! A lot of chumils fell off the tree next to the lake!”

“Wow! Let's make a cracked chumil cake!”

“But...there aren't any guests...”

“W-Well, some *might* show up later!”

The road between De Marl and Uru Ki was closed off, and the foot traffic to our inn had fallen accordingly. People coming from Fei Lu knew they would be stalled there, so they came prepared. So while our business was dwindling, it was probably booming for merchants and inns around Uru Ki.

Still, since our inn was the only one between Fei Lu and Uru Ki, we *did* get the occasional group, but...rumor had it those areas were closed because there'd been frequent skirmishes between Edesa Kura and the Allied Army, which included De Marl and Saikorea.

First, they seemed to be fighting over who was to slay some zombies. As far as we were concerned, it didn't matter who did it so long as the nasty things were slain! After all, the zombies around these parts were unusually large...

...But that was just Edesa Kura's excuse to open hostilities.

What is that country thinking?!?

"Tiiiiiiina!"

"Ah, Mister Giyaga!"

A large carriage rolled down the road leading to the inn, dragging several wagons with it. Its tent had the mark of a chimera on it. That caravan belonged to the traveling merchant, Mister Giyaga!

"It's been so *long*! Welcome!"

"It really has! Well, business has been on the rise, what with all the fighting."

"Oh?" One of Giyaga's assistants, Melissa, poked her head out of the carriage and looked at Moné. "Who's this girl? Some guest's kid?"

"Oh, right! I should introduce you."

Moné, bashful girl that she was, sheepishly hid behind a tree and looked over at us. *True, we don't get many customers right now, but we're still an inn. She should at least know how to greet our regular clients.* I motioned for her to come closer, and she shyly shuffled over to Mister Giyaga.

"This is Moné. She also has a twin brother, René. When we traveled to De Marl last year, Dad found them wandering around after they lost their parents and decided to take them in," I explained.

"I-I'm Moné..." she said, bowing her head bashfully. "Hello."

"Pleasure to meet you!" Mister Giyaga exclaimed. "Why, aren't you just as cute as a button!"

"...Boss..." Melissa said, eyeing Mister Giyaga suspiciously. "I've been wondering about this ever since Tinaris was a little girl, but...do you have a *thing* for children or something?"

"O-Of course not! How can you even *think* that, Melissa?!"

He doesn't?! But I was sure he did...

At least he's always known to draw a line when it comes to business! He's a professional merchant, after all! Which reminds me...

"Oh, right, we wanted to buy clothes for René and Moné from you..." I mentioned.

“Of course! We’ve got a great selection, so just take your pick~!” Mister Giyaga grinned.

“All right, I’ll get my stock of medicine, then.”

“Thank you!”

“Oh?” Melissa said, looking around. “Are you done renovating the place?”

“Oh, yes!”

That’s right! Once I’m done giving them the medicine, I’ll get to show them around our shiny, new guest rooms! The Rofola Lodge annex!

It took so...so long to finish building it. Two—or, well, I guess it’s three now—years ago, a centipede monster had wrecked four of our cottages. So, instead of rebuilding them, Ledo the dwarf had torn the whole thing down. I’d handled the blueprints according to a dream from my past life. I’d always wanted to stay in an old-fashioned Japanese inn! So we built a new annex based on that imagery.

We recycled raw materials from the cottages’ ruins and got the rest by chopping down trees in the western woods. We built a large bath, just like I always wanted, and each room was equipped with its own toilet and an open-air bath. For the first floor, we added five single rooms, which we never had at the inn. It also had a dining hall, a meeting room, and a sauna.

The second floor had three rooms for two, and the third floor had three rooms for three. This way, lone travelers could enjoy the place, and I got the large kitchen I always wanted. Plus, I got to decorate it just the way I liked it!

...Of course, because of the war, we don’t have any customers to actually use our brand-new facilities...

“I think your caravan members will have fun seeing what’s new! Should I show you the way?”

“Yes, of course! But first, we need to deal with the clothes and the—”

“Right, the medicine! I’ll bring it right over.”

With everything settled, I sold all the medicine I made over the last few months to Mister Giyaga. And using that money, I bought René and Moné some new clothes. René didn’t want me to, but there’s really no other way of getting clothes except for buying them, so I told him to just accept it.

Still, shopping for a boy was difficult. If I just bought him

something based on my taste, he might not like it. I figured I'd let Moné pick clothes out for him instead, and then he shouted he didn't need them.

What, is he being shy? I mean, I can relate, but he was the one who ran off to the mountain and got his clothes all dirty!

"Oh, and here are the ingredients you asked for," Mister Giyaga said.

"Thank you so much! Perfect! Now I can make lots of high-grade tonics!"

"We'd love to take them off your hands once you're done."

"Hehehe. Of course!"

You're one crafty rascal yourself, Giyaga~!

Heh heh.



AFTER showing Mister Giyaga around the annex, I started working on the sweets he asked me for. With ingredients for a high-grade tonic on hand, I was curious to see if I could make another supreme tonic... *But first, I need to tend to Mister Giyaga and his merchants, who got me the ingredients! Gotta be a good host!*

Today's planned dessert menu was chumil cake with zerada leaf tea. Chumils (this world's version of walnuts) don't have much flavor on their own, so I added some sweet potetos (potatoes). I cut the potetos into moderately sized slices and pan-fried them with sugar and water. Once they cooled, I added flouel (flour), honey, and sugar into the mix with the crushed chumils.

I would've loved to add butter, but it's hard to come by in this world. It's a shame I have to make do without it.

I added some oil, poured it into a cake pan, and baked it for forty minutes in the kindling oven while making sure to keep an eye on the temperature. The result was a freshly baked sweet potato and chumil pound cake that had the crunchy texture of the nuts and the sweet fragrance and flavor of honey and sweet potetos!

"Tiiina!"

"Oh, Nakona, good timing! I just finished making dessert—"

"Really?! What's the occasion— Wait, no, listen! We got new guests!"

"What? Really?!"

We both beamed at each other and exchanged a high five. *Yay! We've got lots of customers today! And I've got dessert ready too. Will we finally be busy for once today?*

"How many?" I asked enthusiastically.

"Just one."

"A-Aw, too bad. I mean, no! One is good too! I'll go get a single room ready. Could you serve the dessert to Mister Giyaga's group?"

"Sure. But could you leave them to Renémoné and go tend to that customer? I think they've got business with you."

"Huh? With *me*? What about Dad?"

"He went to the mountain with Mujimuji to boar hunt so we can have meat for Mister Giyaga's caravan."

Our stock of dried meat wouldn't be enough for everyone. *And that means Dad won't be back before sunset.*

But a single customer looking for me? Is it Mister Jilril, maybe? He does have a way of appearing every now and then, even though we're a long way from Saikorea...

"Mm? What is it?" I asked, noticing the impish smirk on Nakona's lips.

"Oh, *nooother*~♥."

Huh? She's not telling me who showed up. And since they asked for me by name, that implies it's someone she knows, too. And Nakona was often a big worrywart, so I was surprised she'd let me greet them alone.

Uh... This is kind of creepy...

"I'll...go greet them, then?" I asked, a bit cautiously.

"Yeah, you do that."

What's going on?

I made my way to the inn's entrance, still baffled by Nakona's weird behavior. I headed out of the residence, only to find...

Huh?

Leaning against a big tree was a figure covered in a cloak and hood, with a scarf around his neck.

"Huh... M-Mister Renge?!"

"Ah, Tinaris..."

I saw the pair of eyes over his scarf mellow into a smile.

Oh, you poor and mighty scarf...

I imagined the scarf was to keep women from getting the wrong idea. After all, I could just *barely* approach him with a

businesslike smile as I welcomed him inside. I kept a safe distance, though. Because...

“Oh, something smells sweet! What’s today’s dessert?!”

“EEP!”

His eyes are shining...!

Yes, he’s absolutely dazzling.

And when he runs over to me with his arms open he...kind of looks like a big dog. I could almost see a large tail wagging behind his back. He’d told me he had a sweet tooth, but I underestimated just how obsessed he was with sweets.

Before I could back away, he approached my face, sniffing it. He then stared at me with glistening eyes and said dreamily, “It smells like honey syrup!”

“Are you using honey syrup for today’s dessert?!” he asked, gazing expectantly over my head. “And it smells like sugar too! And sweet potatoes!”

“It’s impressive you could tell...” I muttered, taken aback.

“It smells great!”

“Ah, y-yes, yes! You can go over to the annex building over there; there’s a coffee corner. I’ll get you a slice right away.”

“All right!”

...He really does act like a large, friendly dog.

The cute young man followed me from behind, his hand resting on my shoulder. I mean, I *did* get it. In this world, sweets were a privilege of the upper class. But even so, Renge had too much of a sweet tooth.

When we first met in De Marl, he gave the impression of a suave, confident older man. But now, I just didn’t see it.

“I love your sweets, Tinaris!” he exclaimed excitedly on the way there.

“Yes, yes, thank you...” I replied wearily.

Really... Not a speck of that collected confidence... The change is so drastic, it almost feels weird to keep speaking formally to him.

I feel like I’m talking to Renémoné right now... And it’s not just because of my mental age that I think he’s childish...right?

Four months ago, Renge had escorted us back to the Rofola Lodge, so I paid him for his services—in cake. And when I saw him eat, I had to rub my eyes a few times to make sure I wasn’t imagining things.

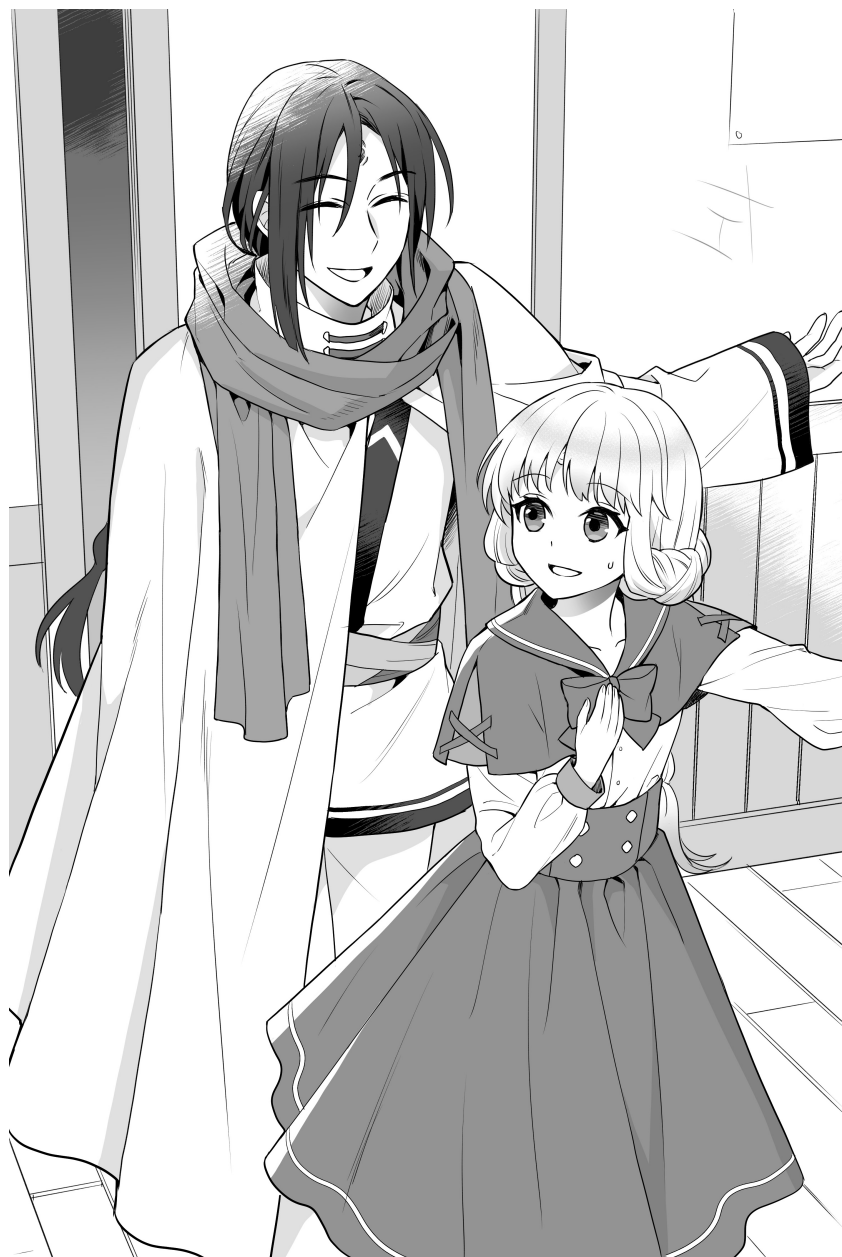
He’d actually put his hands on his cheeks and hummed a

satisfied “Mmmm!” He smiled so hard, I could almost see imaginary flowers blooming around his face.

Of course, since I’d baked that cake, I was very satisfied. But it did crack my mental image of Renge completely. *Or maybe that’s just what he’s really like? Like, this is his real, honest, unhidden self?*

It almost felt like a hoax. A guy so handsome, kind, considerate, and strong...was actually a sweets fiend who regressed to childish behavior while eating desserts?!

With Renge following me, his hand on my shoulder, I entered the annex like a mother goose with her baby chick in tow. Mister Giyaga, who was already eating his cake, thanks to Nakona, stiffened up upon seeing him.



“Oh, hello! I’ll be staying here for a while. Do you mind if I sit next to you?” Renge asked.

“N-Not at all!”

“You’re awfully young,” Melissa pointed out. “Are you traveling alone?”

“Oh, no, I’ve some friends I travel with, but we’re doing our own thing right now. We promised to meet up here in two months, so I came ahead of time for the dinner— I mean, to wait for everyone first.”

...Is it just me, or did he almost say “I came ahead of time for the desserts”? I hope his friends stay strong, given the kind of guy they have to hang around with!

“Really? But what do you plan on *doing* for two months?” Mister Giyaga asked.

“Hm? I intend to stay here? Can’t I?”

“Well, we love to have guests stay for extended periods, but...” I trailed off.

Does he have enough money? I almost asked Renge this, but the Japanese sensibilities that were still ingrained in me stopped me. Sensing his gaze on me, I looked up.

“.....”

His eyes asked me, like a large dog’s, if he could stay.

Ugh...

“W-Well, we’ll give you a discount for a long stay, but you *do* have to pay the lodging fees.”

“Oh, of course! I brought all sorts of things.”

“Y-You brought *things*...?”

Like what? If it isn’t money, what did he bring?!

He finally let go of my shoulder and reached into his cloak, taking out a brown leather bag. He set it on the table, and Mister Giyaga, by his nature as a merchant, approached it curiously.

“This is...!” he exclaimed.

“Is that what I think it is?!” Melissa raised her voice too.

“Isn’t that a dragon scale?!” Mister Giyaga asked excitedly. “And this is powdered dragon bone! And that’s a griffin feather! And orthrus whiskers...! And ropopo mushrooms! I’ve heard you can only get them on the Mythical continent. And phantasmal butterfly cocoons! Fairy wing scales! Illusory spring water... And there’s also this...and that... Where did you get all of this?!”

"Hm?" Renge knitted his brows, confused. "From the Mythical continent, obviously..."

"You went to the Mythical continent?!" Giyaga leaned so far forward, he nearly fell from his chair.

"Yes."

"Whaaat?!" Mister Giyaga looked shocked.

He went where?!

If I remember right, the Mythical continent was a place only the most reckless adventurers went. It's like Mount Everest for them—a place you have to visit at least once to really count as a first-class adventurer. A kind of final destination all adventurers look forward to. If you go there and come back to tell the tale, you're a hero!

And someone who did just that is right in front of me?!

"Th-That's a-a-a-amazing!" Mister Giyaga exclaimed. "We'd love to buy all this stuff off of you!"

"Huh? But I was going to give it to Tinaris..."

"To me?!" I squeaked. "For free?! No, no, no, what are you saying?!"

"I was going to pay for my prolonged stay with it."

"Then sell it off to Mister Giyaga and use the money to pay..."

"Aw," Renge said, looking disappointed. "But I thought you'd like these things better than money..."

"Ugh!"

My conscience aches when he looks so sad about it! He hung his head, crestfallen, and for some reason, I got the mental image of a dejected, whimpering puppy. *Is this some kind of delusion?!*

But these are very rare ingredients... I really would like to use them for alchemy!

"But I can't accept it! I don't know what alchemical properties they have!" I said, muttering my excuses.

"R-Really?"

"Really! I can't actually put any of it to use with my level of knowledge! So sell it to Mister Giyaga...and pay for your stay with money!"

"I see... I thought you'd be happy to get rare ingredients from the Mythical continent, but I guess not... What *would* make you happy, then?"

"Huh?" I uttered dumbly, feeling rather put on the spot. "Well...I'm trying to get ingredients for a high-grade tonic right

now, but they're hard to come by... Oh, and items from the large forest to the east haven't been getting to these parts of the continent..."

"The large forest to the east. Understood. I'll look for things there next time."

...You say some impressive things like it's nothing at all...

The large forest to the east was between Saikorea and the Mythical continent, so it was full of dangerous animals. *But I guess someone who's been to the Mythical continent and back is on a whole different level...*

"Anyway, enough about that. You promised me a snack..." Renge said, seemingly getting impatient.

"I'll bring it over. Take a seat... Oh, and please go wash your hands first," I instructed him.

"Fiiine," he said lazily.

...Yeah, really having second thoughts about treating him like the other adults...

Still, ingredients from the Mythical continent...! Maybe if I study in Saikorea, I'll know how to use these things for alchemy too. Once Renémoné are old enough to work, I could leave to study there...

I could teach Moné how to make sweets, and Nakona's a good cook... I should actually write all my recipes down now. And I could go to the Elven Empire of Forestria to study magic, too...

...Someday...when the world becomes peaceful again...

"....."

What Dad told me last night surfaced in my mind. The world being swallowed by that monster in the sky: the Predatory Star, Sugula.

I...

"Oh, you're here sooner than I thought," Dad told Renge.

"I just got here ahead of the others," he replied.

As I watched Dad speak to Renge from the corner of my eye, I started cooking dinner in the annex's kitchen. Tonight, I'd decided to make curry! *Between alchemy and the spices Mister Giyaga got for me, I've got a lot of seasonings to work with!* I remembered how once, during my past life, I saw a TV show about making curry by mixing in spices. So I tried it out, but...

"....."

What went wrong? It tasted so different from the curry I had in my past life. It was bitter and sour in a way it shouldn't be. As soon

as I tried it, my whole body shuddered...!

"What're you making today, Tina?" Nakona asked me. "It smells pretty crazy."

"Er, I read about a tasty dish you can make by mixing in spices, so I tried it out...but I guess I messed it up...big time."

"Really? Lemme give it a look-see," she said, peering into the pot. "Whoa, look at that color... Uh, is this thing really that *tasty*?"

"No, it turned sour and bitter..." I said woefully.

"Oh, then it's no good."

I gave up on making curry for the time being.

Ah, curry! Ramen! Pork cutlets! Deep-fried chicken! Udon! Soba! And, of course, the old reliable, white rice with miso soup! It takes me back to the days of my past life. I did try to experiment with flouel as much as I could, but Japanese cuisine was the *one* thing I couldn't emulate...!

I focused more on western dishes out of sheer laziness, but maybe I should've focused on Japanese dishes more. *I really have a craving for oden... How do you make soy sauce and miso, again? Can I do something with alchemy?* I flipped through all sorts of recipe books but found nothing that sounded like Japanese cuisine. *I think soybeans are the base ingredient for it? But do those even exist in this world? Do they have a different name too?*

"W-Wow... For something you made, it *really* is bad," Nakona said, bravely tasting my disaster curry.

"Yeah. Sorry, I'll make something else..."

No point in trying to force this into our diet.

But what was missing? Or maybe I put in too much of something? The one thing I'd never made myself was curry powder, since that was sold in stores. I might've needed to watch that TV show more attentively regarding how much spice I should've put in...

"....."

Oh, but...the spices I put in were potapeta, susulul, copan, cocopore, jiem, and laonpo. All of those are spicy, so why did it turn out bitter and sour? Was it the amount? Or maybe I didn't put in enough water?

"Tina?" Nakona glanced at my face.

"I'll try transmuting it," I said as the idea hit me.

"What are you saying?!"

Nakona's strained expression was justified. However, I knew

from many books that alchemy was, in fact, born from various kitchens. A kitchen is a prime place for testing new types of alchemy. Besides, this not-curry would just go in the trash otherwise.

But if I add in some mana, maybe it'll end up being good!

"Hush you," I silenced Nakona. "I'm trying to concentrate."

"Uhh..." Nakona complied uncomfortably.

I poured in some of my mana and mixed it in with the ladle.

Stir, stir, mana... Stir, stir, mana...

I repeated that for three and a half minutes, and then, the pot's interior lit up.

Wait, I really transmuted it! What came out...?

"...Did you burn it?" Nakona asked, her brows furrowed.

"N-No...?"

The brown fluid had turned pitch-black. I tried to use Appraisal magic on it, but the spell just designated it as "???"

Its description had only one word: "Bitter."

But the smell was strange. It almost smelled like cocoa... Since the Appraisal magic didn't say it was poisonous or anything, I scooped some of the black fluid onto a platter and licked it up.

"...Uuuugh..." I groaned upon tasting it.

"Wh-What are you doing?!" Nakona panicked.

It's so bitter! And it's kinda powdery. Putting aside Nakona's warnings, even I have to wonder what the hell I was thinking... But now I know what's missing!

"Tina!?" Nakona looked even more alarmed as I started shuffling around the kitchen.

"Sugar! I'll put a whole sack of sugar in it!"

With the sugar added, I turned on the heat and started stirring it! Once the sugar completely melted, I took another taste. *I knew it!*

"It's good!" I exclaimed.

"Seriously?!" Nakona looked at me, stunned.

"Give it a lick!" I urged her.

"....."

She looked at it with a very reluctant expression as I prodded the platter in her direction. I looked at her like a baby doe and said "Please, Big Sis" which made her go red and exclaim "Nnngh!" She then snatched the platter from my hand.

...Being a little sister has its perks.

"...Huh. It's...good," Nakona said upon giving it a taste.

“Right?”

Of course it'd taste good—it was chocolate!

Not that I ever expected my attempts to make curry would produce chocolate instead... But transmuting the spices created something similar to cocoa. And I've never seen the kinds of plants that'd grow cocoa or coffee beans in this world, but I didn't think mixing spices would result in this...

“This is great!” Nakona cheered. “Way to go, Tina! This is a huge discovery!”

“Yeah! I'll go write down the recipe. Could you take over making dinner?” I asked her.

“Sure!”

“Let's use this for dessert tonight!”

“You can do that?! I can't wait to try it!”

I jotted down the recipe. I ended up using a whole variety of spices...and I needed to get the order down right! Once I had everything written down, I decided to use this newly made pot of chocolate to make chocolate cake!

Or I could let it harden and make it into cookies or biscuits or rub it on other sweets... Oh, chocolate is so lovely! The possibilities are endless!

“Tinaris, what's this sweet scent?” Renge approached me, sniffing the air curiously.

Ah, the sweets fiend appeared...!

“Oh... It's, um... It's tonight's dessert...”

“Oh, really?! Yay!” he exclaimed, his eyes positively glittering above his scarf.

Seriously, how much of a sweet tooth do you have?!

“Tina.” Dad showed up next.

“Yes?”

“I have something I need to talk to you about after dinner, all right?”

“Hm? Sure...”

His expression looked rather serious. *Like last night... Does he want to pick up where we left off? He did tell me to think it over, and I did want to discuss the pros and cons with him. Hmm, but what does he want to talk to me about, really?*

Well, I'll find out soon enough. Working makes time pass by quickly, I found.



AFTER dinner, the guests went back to their rooms to bathe and relax after their long trip. Dad called for me, so I had Nakona and the twins clean up in my place and headed for the banks of Lake Rhioide. But I was surprised by who I found there.

“Huh? Mister Renge?” I called out.

“Oh, Tinaris! The cake was delicious!” he enthused.

“Yes, I heard you say that earlier. I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

Renge was relaxing cheerfully under the tree, standing not far from Dad, when he hurried to me like a large dog. Of course, having someone enjoy my cooking wasn’t a bad feeling. If anything, having someone always so happy to be in my presence felt rather nice...except for one thing...

How old is he to be acting like this?! It feels like I’m feeding someone else’s dog into loving me more than them. Now I feel guilty!

It looked like he might just hug me with that innocent smile of his... If it wasn’t for that scarf, I’d definitely see him grinning. Thinking that the same handsome face I saw in the ballroom in De Marl was so close—and with a dazzling smile at that—made a strange tingle run down my back.

Maybe he’s hiding his face because he’s aware of what his smile does to people?

“He’s sure attached to you...” Dad said dryly, his gaze distant.

“Yeah...” I replied awkwardly.

Renge stood behind me and wrapped his arms around my neck in a lazy embrace. I could almost hear the imaginary tail wagging happily behind him... *I have a man, and such a handsome one at that, clinging to me! So why do I feel so oddly resigned? It feels like he’ll ask to move in with us any second now.*

“Hm, so why are you with Dad, Mister Renge...?” I asked.

“Oh, it’s fine,” Dad said. “I called him over so he can be here for this, too.”

I looked at Dad, puzzled. *He wanted Renge here, too? What, is he hiring him to guard the inn or something?! But if that’s the case, why not have Nakona and the others in on it, too? Or maybe he just wanted him to guard the place since having a cute guy like him around would be good for publicity...*

“Renge,” Dad called out to him.

“Are you sure? I promised two more months,” Renge replied.

"I think she deserves to know a little more about what's going on... Tina, you remember what I told you last night?"

"Ah...! Er...well..." I wasn't sure how I should respond to that. Renge let go of me.

Feeling him move away leaves me a bit lonely... I mean, it's cold outside at night. I can hear the grass crunching under his feet as he moves back under the tree, next to Dad.

Both of them gazed at me. *What Dad told me last night must refer to...that conversation. But, huh? Does that mean Renge knows about it, too?* Upon seeing my confusion, Dad admitted it was Renge who told him everything he told me yesterday.

"...Seriously?" an outraged utterance left my lips.

That's quite the bombshell to drop.

So Renge told Dad about all that business with the Sugula swallowing up the world and the Stella being the only thing that can stop it? And how most humans and demi-humans can't use the Stella, but the Spherit Folk—who were wiped out thirteen years ago—can resist having their minds contaminated by it?

And that I'm...the sole survivor of the Spherit Folk?

"...So you noticed..." I finally said, vaguely.

"Yes." Renge nodded. "When we met four months ago... I saw the Spherit Stone beginning to grow in your forehead. And Spherit Stones are why the Spherit Folk are considered rare and valuable. It's the reason they were hunted down. So I—"

"Turned my pendant into a circlet..." I finished his sentence.

...Right. So he did notice, and that's why he made the circlet. So, yes, it's not like he betrayed me or anything. He protected me by giving me the circlet and in other ways. I considered wrapping a cloth over my head or making a headband, but...the circlet Renge made was the best option, after all. It blended in under my bangs and didn't stand out.

So, I was grateful...yet it made me sad, somehow... Even though it shouldn't have.

"I was surprised when I found out you're a Spherit Folk," Dad admitted.

I hung my head in silence.

"Renge realized what you were...and then he told me about the Sugula. But he said he'd respect your decision, no matter what you choose. Right?"

"Of course," Renge confirmed. "Someone told me you can only

use the Stella with your heart. A heart that cares, that wishes, that prays... You can't use it with negative emotions. And that's why I thought you fit the bill."

Dad averted his gaze from me silently.

Dad... Dad...

My father in this world...

Night fell on the banks of Lake Rhode. The branches of the chumil tree blocked the starlight. There Dad stood, his expression dark. *And the reason for his sorrow is...probably me. He thinks of my future. He pities me, worries for me...*

Or maybe he pities my past? No, that can't be it. He'd never seen my "real" parents. But I can remember them. They were kind and morose... As they closed the lid on my ark, they'd prayed for my future and wellbeing. And the expressions they had back then... were the same as the one Dad had now.

"...Will it expose the fact I'm a Spherit Folk?" I asked Renge.

"After you obtain the Stella?" he asked. I nodded. "If you don't want to tell anyone, you don't have to. The Mythical Beasts know only a Spherit Folk can use the Stella safely, so there's no point trying to hide it from them... But if you want to hide that fact from the humans and demi-humans, the Mythicals will hold their tongue for you."

"I see..."

I've never met any Mythicals...but still, at least this won't become public knowledge. That's good...

"If I obtain the Stella's power, will I need to fight monsters?"

"No, it won't be a physical battle. Just by having someone who can control the Stella around, their power to purify will activate on its own if monsters approach them, and it will erase their Kathra and Camilla. Once that happens, their purified vessels will stay behind, but the dark energies will be gone."

"...W-Wow! That's pretty awesome!" I exclaimed.

"It is. You'll just have to be there... So long as someone has that power, the world will slowly heal. Except..."

"Except what?"

Renge seemed awfully familiar with the Stella. But as he lowered his gaze, seemingly hesitant to continue, I decided to ask him more about it later. *Apparently, the Stella is more amazing a power than I even imagined. But from the sound of it, there's more to it*

than just that...

"The Sugula is borne of dozens of years' worth of the Kathra and Camilla that contaminate Wisty Air. It'd take an equal amount of time to purify that amount. Well, since you're a Spherit Folk, I believe you have a lifespan of about 700 years..."

"P-Pardon?" I sputtered, surprised.

Spherit Folk live that long?! 700 years?! HUUUUH?!

"So just think of it as investing twenty...maybe thirty years of that lifespan for it. The reason behind the Sugula's formation isn't clear yet, but we'll continue looking into it. But at the moment, the Sugula's birth is being accelerated... And one clear source of the Camilla is mankind's religions."

"Ah..."

"...But twenty or thirty years is a long time by human standards. And, well...if you inherit the power of the Stella and keep purifying the monsters...a day may come where you will be worshipped as a holy woman...just as Akari-Berz once was."

H-H-Ho—

"Holy woman?! Me?!" I exclaimed.

"And honestly, I think that's much more preferable to people worshipping strange gods, but..."

"Well, she can figure that out later," Dad interjected.

"Yes, but it's worth informing her about it ahead of time." Renge shook his head. "It could become a burden to her."

"M-Mm, right..." Dad groaned.

Renge really is looking out for me... He didn't have to tell me about this, but he did. What will he do if I say no because of it?

"And what happens if I refuse?" I asked.

"Well, you'll just have to wait for the world to be destroyed. Or, well, if nothing else, human civilization will be annihilated again..."

"....."

He really says it all so easily. I mean, this isn't a choice at this point; it's an ultimatum!

"...Fine, I'll do it," I eventually said.

"Tina...!" Dad cried.

"It's fine, Dad..." I said calmly. "I'll accept the power of the Stella. And for the first thing I do with it...let me heal your arm. I hear the Stella's miraculous power can recover lost limbs, right? Then I *want* to heal your arm. I've always wanted to repay you for

everything... And I want to protect this world you and Nakona live in."

"...Guh."

I still can't believe it. Me, saving the world. Monsters will be purified simply by being in my presence... In which case, I don't think I'll ever really get used to this. But I think I already made up my mind last night.

Of course, I'll never give up on making a supreme tonic! But if this gives me another way of healing Dad's arm for sure...and a way to protect this world everyone lives in...then that's the best route to go.

"Thank you," Renge said, his voice sounding awfully pained.

"Hm?"

Wait, why is he thanking me?

"Then I'll tell you what you're supposed to do to inherit the Stella. All right?" he went on.

"Yeah?"

It feels like Renge suddenly took control of the conversation, but... something feels off. What is it? His eyes were so sad just a minute ago, but now he looks primed to fight. It's so different from how he acted this afternoon...

"By the way, did you tell Tinaris about me?" Renge asked Dad.

"No... But, yes, you're right. I'll tell her. You see, Tina, Renge...he's..."

I gulped. Dad folded his arm with a severe expression. Renge looked at him curiously. *I mean, I'm the one who wants to know the most right now. What's going on here?*

"When I found you thirteen years ago, a Mythical Beast led me to you... Remember how I told you that?"

"Yes." I nodded.

That Mythical Beast who saved my life. I don't remember its face and voice very well after all these years, but I do want to thank them one day.

"Well, he was that Mythical Beast, apparently," Dad said, jerking his chin toward Renge.

"Huh?" I said, dumbstruck.

"Ehehe?" Renge cocked his head.

Huh? What? Why are you going "Ehehe"? Don't you have something better to say?!

"Huuuuh?!" I exclaimed again.

"You probably don't remember because you were a baby back

then, but you should still know.”

Well, yes, my memories of that time are pretty faint. I guess that despite my lifespan ranging centuries, I still have the same memory as a human.

...Not that now's any time to draw these kinds of conclusions. I mean, I did get the feeling I knew Renge from somewhere!

“So I *did* meet you before!”

“Yes, I suppose you did.”

“...H-Hm. I should thank you somehow...! You saved my life back then by leaving me with Dad! Please, let me make it up to you somehow!”

“...Tina...” Dad uttered.

Oh, it's such a relief! It's like I finally picked out a bone that was stuck in my throat or drained water clogging my ear! Please let me thank you. Let me repay you for what you've done for me, Renge!

He approached me and leaned in close. Then he gently whispered into my ear, “You already have.”

Huh? But...but I...didn't do a thing!

“I mean, you introduced chocolate into this world! There's nothing else like it!” he said jovially.

“That's enough for you...?”

“Your chocolate was tasty! Really! Even better than honey syrup. This is a new invention. A piece of culture...no, of civilization...that ought to be passed down for prosperity! I want to eat that every day. So Tinaris, please make more of it!”

“D-Don't be ridiculous!” I told him, appalled. “Do you know how *hard* it was to gather all the spices for that chocolate?!”

Oh, that came across as rude, didn't it? But, I mean, what is he saying?! I asked him a serious question, and he's acting like a little kid! There's being weak to sweets, and then there's this guy!

“...I can't have it every day?” he whined, looking at me like a sad puppy.

“Not every day, no. But if I had the plants to cultivate the ingredients for it... I guess...”

“Really?!” Renge's eyes lit up.

“But there are a few plants that won't grow well in this region's soil. You can only grow copan and cocopore in the west, in the demi-humans' continent, and jiem and laonpo need soil with good water drainage. And Rofola isn't good for this. We have a lake in front of us, a mountain behind us, and even a hot spring. The

water drainage is fine, but the soil is too moist. And since spices mostly grow in the west, our soil isn't great. I'd need a greenhouse to cultivate most of it."

"Oh, too bad..." Renge said, visibly disappointed.

"Ngh..." I winced.

Oh, come on, stop tormenting my conscience like that! I can't stand it when you do that!

"Ahem," Dad coughed dryly. "Tina?"

"Oh, yes! Where were we?"

Shoot! I went off topic when we were talking about something important. But does this really count as me having already returned my favor to Renge...? Really...?

"In other words, Renge is a Mythical Beast," Dad continued, bringing us back on topic. "I checked before, and he's definitely the same Mythical that left you with me. So I think he's trustworthy."

"Oh, yes, I agree!"

I don't doubt that. If Renge is the Mythical Beast that saved me thirteen years ago, I kind of feel like I can trust him without a second thought! He's the first person who saved me, after all!

...The bandits? Yeah, those don't count!

"...You believe me very easily," Renge said. "Aren't you going to ask me to show you my other form?"

"Well, Dad says he saw you... Right, Dad?"

"...Are you all right with just my word?" Dad asked.

"Well, hmmm...if you're willing to show me, why not?" I said.

"I can't do that right now," Renge said.

You can't?

"It might be nighttime, but there are still people in the inn," he explained.

"Oh, that's what you mean..."

He was worried Mister Giyaga and the merchants might see him. And yeah, I could imagine Mister Giyaga would make a fuss if he found out there's a Mythical here. Rumor had it he was once rescued by a Mythical Beast—a chimera—once, so he had an unusual amount of admiration for Mythicals.

"...For now, let's talk about what we do next," Renge said. "I want you to meet the king of our Mythical continent, Tinaris."

"The king of the...Mythical continent?" I parroted him.

"We say king, but technically, she's a queen... The Dragon Queen Curalius. Her heart is the container hosting the Stella right

now.”

“...Really?”

Hold your horses. I thought containing the Stella influences your spirit! Is this Curalius okay because she's a dragon? But...her heart...?

“Curalius can't hold on for much longer. That's why we need you to accept the power as soon as possible...”

“I-Is that because the power's influencing her mind negatively...?” I asked.

“No. It's her lifespan,” Renge said, shaking his head.

“Her what?!”

Dragons have lifespans?! W-Well, I guess they would, every living thing does. But I always thought dragons were immortal or something...

But wait. He's telling me to go get that power...from a dragon? Well, he did say I'll inherit the power, so it makes sense since I'd need to go get it. But going to the Mythical continent...?

“H-How...?” I stuttered.

“How what?” Renge looked at me quizzically.

“Isn't the Mythical continent far to the east, beyond the great forest and across the sea? How am I supposed to cross the ocean?”

“I'll take you there. We'll fly so you don't have to worry about that.”

“F-Fly...?!”

Did he just say fly?!

“You can fly?! I mean, aren't you a four-legged beast?!” Dad asked.

“That's just one of my forms. My real form is about as large as this giant tree.”

“Huuh?! ” I exclaimed.

“What?!” Dad was shocked, too.

The chumil tree growing on the banks of the Rhioide stood twenty feet tall! But I remembered him as just a big dog... *Wow, I guess Mythicals really live up to their name...*

“If you'd rather ride something else, I can arrange it. How about a griffin? A hippogriff? There's an orthrus and a chimera, too. Or we could have Curalius' son, a dragon, come over—”

“Aaaah!” I cried, flustered.

“She can ride on your back just fine!” Dad settled it. “And I'm letting you know now, I'm coming along!”

“Dad...!”

I was glad to hear that!

"I don't mind," Renge said. "Will Nakona be coming, too?"

"...No." Dad shook his head. "We'll leave her here. And René and Moné, too."

"I see." Renge rubbed his chin pensively. Honestly, having Dad come with me was a big relief... I didn't want to go alone. But then Renge had to go and add, "I don't mind, but do your best not to anger anyone."

"Like who?" Dad asked.

"Like Air," Renge replied.

"...Wait, is the god Air in the Mythical continent?"

"No, Air is technically everywhere. It overlooks the world through the Spherits. But the Mythical continent has more Spherits in it than the demi-human continent does. The Spherits all fled from the human continent over to the Mythical and demi-human continents. It's said it's harder to use magic on the human continent because of Camilla's presence, but the relative absence of Spherits is a factor, too."

"Wait, they *left*? Spherits have wills of their own?!"

"No, they don't. But they do have a natural aversion to Camilla, since it inhibits them from absorbing mana from Air. And since the Air in the human continent is highly polluted with Camilla, they naturally migrated over to other continents."

"Oh no..."

Was this why alchemy was usable here while magic wasn't? After all, alchemical weapons worked so long as they were exposed to the Air, but the pollution impacted the quality of an alchemical apothecary's work...

Even Spherit Folk like me couldn't use magic all that well because the Air was polluted and there weren't enough Spherits around. I guess I was still like a normal human back when I tried to wield magic, since the stone hadn't surfaced in my forehead yet. I'd assumed that so long as there were Spherits around, Spherit Folk could use magic normally...

"But wait, if there are fewer Spherits, there should be fewer souls around... Like, fewer babies being born...!" I said, realizing how bad things really were.

"That's true..." Renge said with a frown. "Forming new souls is becoming...difficult. And that's partly why zombies are forming and why they're getting so large."

"Their size is a factor too? But why?"

“...If a baby on the verge of birth can’t receive its soul, it and its mother’s body are polluted with large amounts of Camilla... The Sugula also influences this. If it weren’t there, the babies would just be stillborn. But since the mother’s body has a soul, the Camilla forming around it uses it as a source of sustenance to make its vessel larger. That’s why zombies get so large.”

I covered my mouth with my hand. *I’m completely speechless. That’s awful...*

“...And if I purify them with the Stella, will they go back to normal?” I asked.

“They won’t. They’ll just be destroyed... But it would save the mother’s soul, break it down into Air, and return her to the cycle of transmigration. There’s fewer Spherits around, but they’re not completely gone.”

I see... After all, the Spherits break dead souls down into the Air. Monsters are full of Kathra, and if they die, they disperse all of it and turn other living things around them into monsters.

It felt like I had everything backward. When Renge explained things like that, it made the Camilla seem so much worse than the Kathra...

“...I want to receive the Stella as soon as possible,” I said, steeling myself.

“Tina...” Dad looked at me sadly.

“I mean, that’s horrible... Imagine finally having a child, but then that happens...”

This is messed up, and it needs to be fixed, fast! The thought of it happening to someone I know is just terrible! As a woman, I can’t let this stand!

“...We can set out as soon as Giyaga and the others leave,” Dad said quietly.

“B-But...” I stuttered.

“Nakona can’t handle them on her own. It’s our first big group of guests in a while. And some of our regulars, at that... You can take that time to have Renge tell you the things you need to know.”

I hung my head.

“Are you going to tell Nakona?” Renge asked, his eyes moving from Dad to me.

“I’ll tell her,” I said, not needing to think about it twice. “I think she’ll understand.”

“I see... Well, either way, I’m ready whenever you are.” Renge

nodded. "The sooner we leave, the better. But you do have a lot to tell her."

"Say, can I ask you something?" I asked.

"Sure. What is it?"

There's a question I need to have answered. There's a lot I want to ask about thirteen years ago, but that'll have to wait. He does seem satisfied enough with the sweets as my thanks for what he did.

"Why didn't you tell me about all this four months ago?"

He realized I was a Spherit Folk back then, and like he said, the sooner we handled this, the better. If he'd told me back then, maybe we could have prevented any pregnant women from turning into zombies over the last four months. And then there was also the roads closing up because of Edesa Kura... Okay, maybe we wouldn't have been able to prevent that, but still...

"...I figured I'd be better off letting an adult explain it to you first."

"An adult...?"

"Him." He jabbed his thumb at Dad.

O-Oh...

"I understand, I think..."

I was twelve... Well, now I'm just thirteen. But yes, I was...am... physically a child. It's a valid reason if there ever was one.

Either way, Dad and I decided we'd tell Nakona about this after Mister Giyaga left, then we'd leave for the Mythical continent. Renge said I could think about it for a couple more months, but that was absurd. What if some poor lady ended up turning into a zombie during that time?!

And I hadn't seen them since we last went to De Marl, but it'd been a year since Kunon and Michael got married. So it was probably about time they'd have a baby on the way...! I couldn't let someone I knew turn into a zombie!



"ALL right!" I pumped my fists energetically.

"You're oddly enthusiastic today," Nakona remarked.

"I'm going to make a high-grade tonic!" I told her.

"Oh, that's why. Well, good luck."

"Thanks!"

I left breakfast to Nakona and got to work condensing the materials Mister Giyaga sold me yesterday. I refined it all with my mana and turned it into a powder!

“...I should remember what Elysis told me...”

Will it work? I should concoct the medicine while thinking about the person I want to use it on... To hope hard that the person who uses this medicine gets better. I concentrated, regaining my magical energy as I stirred the concoction and poured in more mana.

Poof!

The pot lit up. *It's ready.* I leaned in to look and...

“...It's a no-go.”

I'd hoped I made it properly this time, but the tonic was the usual thick pink color. I Appraised it, and yes, it was a normal high-grade tonic. I used the rest of my ingredients to brew more after that, but they all just turned into high-grade tonics.

...The supreme tonic is one tough nut to crack.

I needed to use the things Giyaga and his merchants sold me anyway, so it wasn't a total loss. And if every potion ended up becoming a supreme tonic, that'd be a mess in its own way. So it was fine...

Now then. I used what little was left of my ingredients to practice adding holy magic into my concoctions. The first thing I wanted to do with the Stella was heal Dad's arm, but if I could brew a supreme tonic to do it instead, I preferred to go that route. *Because I made it! That's important! That's the point!*

I've been practicing alchemy for nine years now! I want my polished skills to make it! I won't rely on coincidences! Let's go!

“.....”

I converted the Air around me into holy healing magic and added it to the mix. I only ever tried this with low-grade tonics and antidotes, which resulted in startling changes. It turned them into not just medicine but compound remedies. For example, if I added holy magic to an antidote, the new antidote also helped to relieve fatigue and heal minor injuries. I was delighted to succeed in making one of the potions on my “must-make someday” list.

But still, it was a far cry from a mana recovery potion or a supreme tonic...

It seemed these extra effects manifested more easily in lower grade tonics. When I tried it with high-grade tonics, the effects weren't as pronounced. I assumed it was because lower grade tonics

just had more growth potential. It was just a personal theory, of course... I'd have to prove it in the future.

Alchemy sure is profound...

"Let's see, then..."

My theory was that adding holy magic to high-grade tonics was very unlikely to result in much of a difference. I used Appraisal magic to check the tonic.

"Ideal quality. Extra effect: 'healing power +5'...? What does '+5' mean?"

But ideal quality! That's great! I can't help but be a little happy about that... But once again, another weird, unexplained effect was added to the tonic through my experimentation.

I shrugged and jotted down the new effect into my notebook. Maybe Dad or Mister Giyaga would know what this +5 thing meant?

Ugh, this is kind of frustrating.

I read a lot of books to increase my Appraisal magic's level, but it still wasn't enough... Mister Giyaga had knowledge from his long-running experience as a merchant, and Dad had his knight's education. *Compared to them, I still have a long ways to go...* I tried to study while there weren't any customers, but I mostly read recipe books. *But I guess reading recipes won't give me the detailed knowledge I need for this...*

Maybe I'll get books that'll teach me about these sorts of things next time.

...Actually, wait. If we're heading east, can't we stop in Saikorea? After all, Saikorea has two state alchemists who're alchemical apothecaries. I'd like to meet them!

"Hmm, hmm, hmm~!" I hummed to myself as I put my tonics into big and small jars.

I placed the +5 tonic into my pouch. I then left my alchemy study and got ready to make lunch. *Also, we asked Renémoné to clean up, so I should check on them, too—*

Oh?

"...Mister Renge, what are *you* doing here?"

"Oh, Tinaris. I could ask you the same question."

"I was just using alchemy to brew some medicine."

I found Renge—in his normal, non-sweets craving mode—standing on the banks of the Rhioide. It almost felt odd seeing him this serious after how many times I'd seen him on a sugar high. *Or*

maybe his sweet-tooth mode is his normal self...?

"I see. Alchemy..." he said, pensively.

"You don't like alchemy?" I asked.

I'd heard Mythicals didn't like humans using alchemy, but I never heard why. Mister Giyaga mentioned it when he was gushing about the chimera that saved him, so I was only half-listening to him at the time. Was Renge one of those Mythicals who hated alchemy, too?

"Some Mythicals hate alchemy, yes. Chimeras, for example."

"...They do?"

That's exactly what Mister Giyaga told me...!

"...You see, there was a time when alchemists used chimeras as a model and tried to 'mix' different animals together. But having multiple souls thrust into a single vessel warped those animals' sorrow and agony into Kathra," Renge explained.

"That's horrible..." I said.

"The sins the humans of old committed ended up becoming Kathra. The source of the monsters you know today is the result of humans trying to create chimeras... And the *real* chimeras abhorred that humans did this and decided to never appear before mankind again. They refused to leave the Mythical continent and thought alchemy was evil... Personally, I think it's a good tool. Humans devised it to overcome their weaknesses, after all... At least, that's how I feel."

Was that why there were so many animal and insect-shaped monsters? Because alchemists tried to mix different creatures together? The people of the past had some pretty terrible ideas...!

Mixing "ingredients" together with mana...but those ingredients were actually living things! The thought gave me goosebumps.

"But it seems humanity forgot how and why monsters come to be. That history hasn't been passed down on the human continent," Renge continued.

"R-Right. I've never heard anything about the Kathra being the result of sins humans committed long ago..."

Mister Sirius never spoke about the truth behind that sin, either. He probably didn't want to tell me about it because I was a child back then, but I hadn't delved into it any deeper either. *But that's how the Kathra came to be...*

"You really know so many things, Mister Renge!" I pointed

out.

“Well, despite appearances, I’ve lived for a long time.”

“Really? You only look a little older than me... You haven’t changed much in the last thirteen years, though.” I stared at his face.

“Yeah, I stopped aging about three thousand years ago. It’s been getting hard to tell exactly how old I am recently.”

“Thr—”

Three thousand years?! Did he just say three thousand years?

“I’m half-human and half-Mythical Beast, so I’m probably closer to being a demi-human than a Mythical per se... But sadly, I don’t age like the demi-humans do. My Mythical Beast blood is probably thicker than my human blood.”

“You’re a...demi-human too...?”

“It’s said the demi-humans’ ancestors were born from the mixing of human and Mythical Beast blood, you know? Lizardmen are an easy example. They’re the offspring born from the union between dragons and humans. I’m a little special, though... I’m a different kind of demi-human, born from another world’s Mythical Beast marrying a human from this world. When my mother’s lifespan reached its end, my father left this world. Coming to Rofola reminded me of that, I suppose...”

“Your parents lived in Rofola...?”

“A long time ago. They built a small house on Mount Rofola’s peak and lived there. If I have a birthplace, this would be it, I suppose...”

“.....”

Renge squinted up at the mountain.

So...that’s Renge’s birthplace...

I turned around and looked up at the mountain’s peak, too. There was a faint layer of clouds hanging over it. The weather didn’t look very good.

“I used to look down from there at the lake. It’s strange. Somehow, I can remember that so clearly,” he said.

“Really? Did you used to fish here?”

“No, I just looked at the lake. My mother was human, but my father and I hardly ate. So my mother’s younger brother—my uncle—brought her food. I think I can faintly remember that, too.”

“Then...is your mother’s grave around here...?” I asked.

“She doesn’t have one anymore. Years after she passed away,

the first Sugula was born, and the shower of Kaguya destroyed her grave. I only really recognize this area. The rest of the terrain has really changed... All the cities, countries, cultures, and civilizations... Everything's changed."

"Everything...?"

Even the terrain...? All the cities, countries, and civilizations...? Did alchemy and magic change over the ages, too? I guess Renge must feel like I did back when I first woke up here. Thrown into a whole different world... I can relate to that.

My old world was nothing like this one. The people, the cities, the countries, the civilization, and society. It was all different. There were similar fruit and vegetables, good people and bad people, wars... Those things were kind of the same. But there was no one I knew here, and the technology level was completely different.

Renge must feel the same way I did. And thinking about that makes me feel so lonely for the both of us...

"I'd like to go there," I said.

"Hm? Go where?"

"Your old house. There might not be anything there now, but I'd like to see it."

"But we'd have to go to the mountain's peak," he protested.

"Can't you fly?" I asked him with a sly smile.

His expression looked strained.

"....."

He glanced around nervously, checking to make sure no one was around. His expression was mixed, but eventually, he heaved a resigned sigh. I could imagine his lips were contorted into a scowl under that scarf.

"It'll be cold," he warned me.

"Then let me get under your cloak," I replied.

"Ugh..."

Being a kid has its perks!

Renge reluctantly flapped the right side of his cloak open. I got under it and grabbed onto his waist from behind.

...This is a pretty awkward position, actually. I wouldn't mind as much if it was Dad, but holding onto another man like this is embarrassing...

"Let's fly."

"Now?! BWAH?!"

I heard the wind howl in my ears, and an odd, weightless sensation overcame me. And then, the next moment, I felt my feet settle back down on solid ground.

Huh? I thought we'd be, like, flying through the sky...

"...Here we are," Renge announced.

"Already?! Wh-Whoa!"

He opened his cloak, and I found myself in a foggy place. Around us was a wide, spacious clearing! There were flagstones here and there on the ground, and a short distance from us was a stone building with a roof... No, it was a well!

I ran over to it and looked around. Apparently, it was a gazebo made of piled-up yellow stones. *This is incredible. It looks like it was built meticulously while keeping things like balance in mind! How did they make this?* I looked at it closely, but the only thing I could say was that it was impressive.

Under the domed roof was a normal stone well. I peered down into the square opening, but it was dry inside. There were a lot of pebbles on the bottom and what looked like the remains of a bucket.

"....."

I took another look around. There was nothing but the well here. I could barely make out some yellow flagstones sticking out of the soil here and there. It was such a desolate place...

"This is where your house was?" I asked.

"See? I told you, there's nothing left," Renge replied with a laugh.

He walked by me and headed to where the slope was visible. I followed him.

Wow, look at this view...

There was still a layer of fog hanging in the air, but far in the distance, I could see the waters of Lake Rhode twinkling. It wasn't cloudy down there, so those sparkles were probably from the lake reflecting the sunlight. The lake was like a blue expanse, and next to it was our field and vegetable garden. And then came the forest and the road. The inn was hidden from sight by the back mountain, though.

"It's pretty..." I muttered.

"Yeah... Looking at this takes me back," Renge said, sounding nostalgic.

As I kept watching wordlessly, I suddenly felt droplets hit me.

It's raining! I covered my head with my arms. I didn't consider it when I saw the clouds hanging over the mountain, but yeah, of course, it'd rain here!

Just as I was wondering what to do, Renge covered me with his cloak again. *It's warm...*

"Let's head for the well," he suggested.

"O-Okay." I nodded sheepishly.

Right, the gazebo has a roof. I moved, still hiding under his cloak. We took cover under the roof, just as the rain was turning into a real downpour.

Phew, right on time...

"I think it'll stop soon enough," Renge said.

"Really?" I asked.

"Yes, that's what it looks like. I can tell by the smell."

"Let's wait, then."

I tried to move and sit on the well's edge, but Renge wouldn't let me out of his cloak. *I mean, it's warm, so that's nice, but... It kind of makes my heart beat like crazy. Is that inappropriate? I mean, based on just looks, Renge is a handsome, nice guy, so...*

"....."

...But as I looked up at him, his expression looked gloomy. Which made sense to me... If I saw my apartment in Japan in this kind of desolate state, I'd be speechless, too. Not that I had too many fond memories of it, but thinking back on it, I did have a history with it.

Some bad memories, some bittersweet... And now, when I think about my father from my past life, who kind of went mad from the fear of his impending death...I can kind of understand why he acted the way he did.

It only took me a moment to die. And it was painful, cold, and terrible. I only felt it for a brief moment, but the person who had been my father had to put up with that fear for so long.

...It must've been terrifying.

That doesn't mean I excused him for being so violent and inconsiderate to Mom and me, but...I now understood a part of why he became that way.

"...Mister Renge, your father is a Mythical Beast, right?" I asked him.

"Yes."

"Who did you like better, your father or your mother?"

“.....”

His expression turned complicated. Based on what he'd told me earlier, it sounded like his father abandoned him. Which I guess would mean he liked his mother better? Not too long ago, I probably would've seethed and said, “This is why dads suck!” But now...

“I suppose it was my mother. I feel like with my father, I respected him more than anything.”

“Really?”

“If my father was still here when the Sugula was born two thousand years ago... He probably wouldn't have failed like I did. My father was a Cerberus Mythical Beast and was considered a genius among them. If it wasn't me facing the Sugula back then, but my father, he probably would've...” he trailed off.

“Mister Renge...”

“If it was my father, I think...less people would've died...”

The rain kept pattering against the roof. It was growing weaker but still didn't seem to be stopping. It was as if Renge's eyes, gazing into the distant past, were being reflected by the weather.

I don't know what the Sugula is, exactly, but...

“You didn't have another way, right?”

“No... We didn't know the Spherit Folk could contain the Stella back then.”

“Then you did the right thing. Yes, a lot of people died, and civilizations may have disappeared... But...things did survive thanks to you.”

“...They did?”

“Yes,” I nodded.

His eyes seemed to ask me, “Like what?”

What a thickheaded man... Well, I guess he's not technically a man.

“Like people's lives. See?”

I'm right here, after all. That proves it more than anything. My mother and father let me escape, and that's why I lived to thirteen. If any one thing—any one person—was missing along the way, I wouldn't be here.

It's like the rules of alchemy.

“And it's because you kept the world alive that we met each other.”

“.....”

“It’s all thanks to you, Mister Renge.”

I reached out and touched his cheek. Over his scarf, of course! N-Not his skin! Touching a man’s skin would be too much for me! But his scarf was so fluffy... *How is it so soft? And it looks so easy to breathe in. What is it made out of?! I want it!*

“.....”

“?!” I gasped.

Suddenly, he rested his head on my shoulder.



R-R-R-R-Renge, your head!

"Uuuuuh?!" I squeaked.

But he stayed silent and didn't say a word. *Wh-What am I supposed to do here?! It's still raining... And it's not like he's particularly heavy, but...! It's just, I mean, you know...right?!? I'm a teenage girl now, and he, well...he at least looks like a young, handsome man. So I don't know how I'm supposed to interpret him resting his head on my shoulder like this!*

"...Tinaris," he finally uttered.

"Y-Yes?"

"...Save the world..."

"....."

I felt my throat tighten. His voice sounded so...tragic. Like he was begging for help from the bottom of his heart. I couldn't say anything in response. He wrapped his arms around me and held onto me tightly. It didn't feel like an embrace, though. It was more like he was...clinging to me for help.

"...All I can do is ruin things..."

"That's not true... It isn't." I patted his back soothingly and reminded him, "You saved me from that zombie, remember?"

He's like a child... Or, maybe not a child, but like someone who's definitely overthinking things. Kind of neurotic. Or maybe just...overly sensitive?

Aah, it feels like I'm looking back at how I used to live when I worked myself into exhaustion. What did I want people to tell me back then? Did I want someone to deny that I'm no good? No... Even if someone did deny it, I wouldn't believe them. No, what I wanted wasn't that. But it wasn't entirely off the mark, either.

And so, I told him...

"You don't have to blame yourself, Mister Renge."

He was older than me. But somehow, this man—again, I suppose man is technically wrong—was, I realized, kind of like me. The same way I was when I was depressed, overworked, and at my lowest. Even if I *wanted* to do something, it never went well. And when it didn't, it tore at my heart and body, tormenting me. My heart always felt heavy, and I was always so sad...

For him, it must've been so much worse. He had people's lives on his shoulders, after all. I couldn't imagine the sorrow and pain involved with that... What kept him going through that kind of life?

There must have been something...

Save the world, huh?

The world...

...That's silly. You didn't ruin the world. You gave it hope again. You're such a troublesome person. Too earnest...and too kind.

"Yeah, I will. But I'm still a child, so...Renge, you have to keep me safe."

I shifted my body a little, forcing him to raise his head. He wasn't crying, but his expression was awful. It ruined his pretty face.

"...That's almost like..." he muttered.

"Oh, was calling you by just your name rude of me? Y-You don't like it?"

"No...it's fine. I just remembered my mother was the only one who called me that..."

"Just Renge?"

"Yes..."

"Well, you could call me Tina...if you'd like."

"...Really?"

I stroked the top of his head. *He's 3,000 years old...? No way. I'm way older than him mentally!*

"...Thank you..." he said, half-crying.

He's not shedding any tears, but his face looks so depressed... Having a pretty face sure is a privilege. I get why people in my last life always said hunks have it easy.

"Ah, the rain let up!" I exclaimed, pointing up at the sky.

And while I was distracted by the most trivial thing possible, Renge tilted his neck. *He really does look like a large dog this way.*

"...Tina..." he murmured as he brought his handsome face close to mine.

"Ah!"

Huh, wait, what? Is he...? No way!

"I want some chocolate."

"...Can you compromise for some caramel?" I asked with a sigh.

"...I can."

You can, huh...?



THREE days later, Mister Giyaga and his group left for the demi-human continent. When everyone heard me calling Renge by just his name, they looked at me all shocked. *I really surprised them... Hehehe...*

"Tina, I want some pudding!"

"Grr! Pudding takes a long time to make, so wait till dinner for some!"

"Is it just me, or have you been kind of *mean* to me recently?!"

"I'm not a sweets dispenser!"

"Aww..."

...There, see? Dad and Nakona and René are staring at you with such cold eyes! Can you see that, Renge? Can you?! That's why no one thinks it's strange I'm calling you by your name! Especially with you trailing around me all day like a chick following a hen! What are you, a stalker?!

I guess a stalker wouldn't follow me so conspicuously...

But really, he was like a kid! He kind of got in the way, but sometimes I couldn't help thinking he was cute! And I was a thirteen-year-old kid myself, for heaven's sake! He was kind of like Mujimuji when he followed *Moné* around. And he could be like an animal in the strangest ways...

...Does this make him my...pet? No, no, I don't want a pet that's this much of a nuisance...!

"Nakona, do you have some time later?" Dad asked her.

"Hmm? What is it?" she asked.

Oh... It's about that, I thought to myself with a twinge of misplaced guilt.

"Tina...?" Renge, still following me around, quickly picked up on the pain in my eyes.

"O-Oh, it's nothing," I told him.

Besides, you're getting in the way of my work, Renge. Shoo!

"You're in the way, Renge, you dunce," René told him curtly.

"Dunce...?!" Renge gaped at him.

"R-René, stop that!" I chided the boy. "He's still technically our guest, you know!"

"T-Technically'...?"

...Yeah, I think our general attitude toward Renge has been becoming crude. Is that my fault?

"René, you've been awfully rude to me recently... But fine, whatever. So, what are you gonna be doing now, Tina?" Renge

asked me.

"I'll be using that +5 recovery tonic to see if I can make a mana restoring potion."

"Oh..."

I figured I'd keep working on that potion while I waited for our talk with Nakona. I took my notebook and pen and headed into my alchemy room...and, of course, was followed by a certain cute guy who behaves more like a Golden Retriever.

It turned out the +5 recovery high-grade tonic I made the other day really *did* increase its healing power by an extra 5 percent. When I showed it to Dad and Mister Giyaga, they were staring at it like it was one of the ingredients Renge had brought from the Mythical continent.

Apparently, it was the first time either of them had seen anything like it. I sold the lot of them to Mister Giyaga at a 5 percent markup but kept a bottle for research purposes.

"...I'm not sure I can make any more of these +5 recovery potions, though," I muttered to myself.

It was my first time transmuting something like that with healing magic. Mister Giyaga swore he'd gather me more ingredients for high-grade tonics, but that was easier said than done, given recent events. Still, I couldn't make any more high-grade tonics until he brought me the ingredients.

Incidentally, I didn't know how long that +5 recovery effect actually lasted. When I sold it to Mister Giyaga, he said with a crafty smile that he'd have some high-ranking adventurers test it after they bought it...

If only all the high-grade tonic's ingredients were plant-based, I could just cultivate them myself...

"Isn't that a waste?" Renge asked me.

"It is. But...if we had a mana restoring potion, it'd solve the issue of polluted Air lowering the quality of medicine..."

And I don't mean just for me...but for other alchemical apothecaries, too! It'll help stop our entire profession from dying out!

"If that's the problem, why not just make a Spherit Stone?"

"How?"

"Only the Spherit Folk can make them. I think you do it by focusing your mana into ordinary stones."

I stood there in stunned silence for a moment.

...I didn't think of that!

I'm a Spherit Folk! And Spherit Folk can make Spherit Stones! Isn't it necessary to use magic or something...?

I asked Renge about it, but he just said off-handedly, "Huh? No, Spherit Stones are like solidified Spherits, so you're basically taking in purified Air."

"Huh?!" I gawked at him.

"You didn't know that?" he asked.

"No, of course I didn't know that!"

"Still, since people can't normally purify the Air, the stone just takes in the Air around you without having to use the, uh...what do you call it? Mana recovery technique thing? But anyway, isn't that what you're trying to accomplish with your mana recovery potion?"

...Exactly that...

"N-Now I understand why Spherit Stones are so expensive and valuable people were willing to kill for them..."

"That's your takeaway from this?" Renge raised an eyebrow at me.

The mana recovery technique is difficult to master, and alchemical apothecaries are considered truly skilled if they can use it while transmuting at the same time. So with that in mind, wouldn't a potion that recovers your mana be convenient too? That was the thought that'd led me to want to make a mana restoring potion. But Spherit Stones let you gather and use all the mana you want, so of course people desired them!

"Well, since the Air on this continent is polluted, it'll take the stones time to gather clean Air... But unlike Spherits, Spherit Stones don't move around," Renge explained. "I can see why humans want them so badly right now."

"Y-Yeah..."

I'd always thought prospective wizards were the ones who wanted Spherit Stones. But when Shida taught me how to use magic, I realized it's not all that different from alchemy...or rather, from alchemical medicine brewing. Magic required you to use the mana recovery technique while you cast a spell. Except, unlike my line of work, even the most basic of spells required the technique... In a way, magic was even harder than alchemical medicine brewing...

"But yeah, I guess alchemical apothecaries need Spherit Stones, too..."

A potion would help you one time when you drank it. But a

Spherit Stone gives you basically an unlimited supply of mana... Of course, everyone would want that more.

Wait, that's it!

"No...that's *exactly* why we need to make a mana restoring potion!" I exclaimed.

"Why's that?" Renge asked, tilting his head.

"Spherit Stones are reusable but expensive! Mana potions are only usable once but cheaper! That's the difference!" I explained, getting all excited. "In terms of supply and demand, I think this is a much more sustainable and profitable supply chain! If a lot of these potions appear on the market, it'll lower the prices. And if a lot of alchemical apothecaries become capable of making it, they'll both bolster their potion numbers *and* get a steady income! And if alchemical medicine brewing becomes profitable, more people will try to become apothecaries... It's nothing but good things!"

"But you haven't successfully *made* that potion yet, right?" Renge asked.

"W-Well, no..."

Yeah... Simply speaking, it'll require turning the Air into matter. But how do I do that? Spherits gather Air, and Spherit Stones are like solidified Spherits. Is the Air smaller than the Spherits then...? Hmmm...

"Why don't you use an Air Flower?"

"Air Flower? I've never heard of that..."

But the name sounds promising! Where do you find it?! If it's a flower, does that mean I can cultivate it on my own?!

"Well, it grows by basking in the Air from the earth's crust... Air Flowers bloom in a place called the Levinos Spring on the Mythical continent."

"Ah! Can't we grow them *here*, too?!"

"I don't think that'd work..."

"Then what's the *point*?! I want to mass-produce them!" I complained.

Sure, I had admitted to Elysis I might be too fixated on mass-producing things, but...I'm not thinking about it like before, for the profit! I want to mass-produce these because it's necessary for the future of all alchemical apothecaries!

"You really think about some complicated things, don't you?" Renge pointed out.

"Because it's important stuff!"

"Then why don't you just take water and pour your...well, a Spherit Folk's mana into it?"

"You mean the same mana I'd put into a Spherit Stone?"

"I suppose?"

I'd never even made a Spherit Stone, to begin with... If I could, things would be that much easier for me.

Like, seriously, Renge just says whatever comes to mind, without really knowing what he's saying.

...But come to think of it, I never tried just mixing mana with water before. I only ever used water as a base to mix materials together.

"...I guess I can try?"

I'd never seen anything in the recipe books that listed just water as the only ingredient. If it's just adding mana to water, that's simple and basic enough that I could have done it back when I was four!

Now I was curious. I poured some water into my alchemy pot. *What's going to happen, I wonder? It's fine if nothing happens, but you gotta try and see!*

I hummed to myself as Renge watched me pour mana into the water and begin to stir. I stirred a bit more, wondering if it'd even light up at all, and then...

Poof!

It lit up.

"Appraisal!"

I used Appraisal magic to see what I'd got and—

"Mana Restorative (Ideal)"

"...Huh? I actually *made* it?"

"...You did."

What have I been working so hard all these years for?!

"You really make all sorts of amazing things, Tina," Renge said rather calmly.

"If Mister Giyaga sees this, he might faint..."

"I'd imagine so."



THAT night, I showed off the results of my work to Dad and

Nakona in the main building's coffee corner, with Renge watching. I'd tried making the Mana Restorative again that day and ended up making it multiple times. And since it was consistently successful, this was definitely an established recipe.

The only issue was, what if it only turned out like this because I was a Spherit Folk, and other alchemical apothecaries couldn't reproduce the results? I fearfully checked the beginner's recipe book, and the easiest medicines it listed were the low-grade tonic, antidote, and antipyretic. You'd think adding mana to water would be even simpler than that!

So, I figured I'd send Lico and Elysis the recipe and have them check. Mister Giyaga was away on the demi-human continent, so I probably wouldn't see him in the next three months.

Until then, I hid the Mana Restorative along with the +5 restoration tonic in the safest place I knew, my pouch. I stored the other bottles of Mana Restorative I'd made in my alchemy room's underground medicine storehouse. It had two locks, and the door was made of metal, like a bank vault.

That was the best place to store a large stock of medicine... But the tonic *was* useful to have in case of emergencies, so I figured it wouldn't hurt to keep it in my pouch!

"So *that's* what you wanted to tell me?" Nakona asked after I told her about my success. "You stored it away, right? And you sent a letter to Lico about it?"

"Well, yes, but this is actually about something else. Nakona, you see, I...I found out what race I am. And I wanted to tell you..."

"Are you a half-elf or something?" she guessed.

She believed me without a hitch. It made sense she knew I wasn't human. She'd seen me walk out of the bath with my hair wet, so she had seen my long, pointy ears more than once. Of course she'd suspect I'm a demi-human, since my appearance looks closest to a half-elf.

I took off the circlet on my forehead and placed it gently on the table. I took a deep breath and finally said the words.

"...I'm a Spherit Folk."

"....."

I gazed at Nakona. Dad, who was sitting next to her, was sneaking panicked glances at her. *I believe that Nakona will accept me no matter what...*

"...I see. Uncle Romulus didn't die in vain, then."

I was stunned into silence. *That's right.* Nakona's uncle and Dad's brother, Romulus, died in Jiera for his best friend...who was probably my real father. He bravely fought for us and laid down his life. But Jiera was still destroyed...with me being the sole survivor.

"...Yeah. It's thanks to your uncle, Nakona."

The emotions that she was still bottling up finally burst. She covered her mouth with her hand and hung her head.

...There was someone who fought for us. And thanks to that, I'm still alive. Right, Uncle Romulus didn't die in vain!

"And Nakona, about Tina being a Spherit Folk..."

Since I was now too emotional to go on, Dad picked up the conversation. Nakona looked up at him, listening as she wiped the tears from her eyes with a handkerchief. Her expression was grave. Dad told her that he and I were going to the Mythical continent to collect the Stella's power. She simply whispered, "I see."

"...I've been worried about that black dot in the sky, but I never imagined that it's a monster..." she continued after a long pause.

"You believed all this awfully easily, too," Renge noted, surprised.

I suppose it really is hard to expect someone to just believe a story this crazy...

"I mean, everything makes sense with that explanation. Kind of hard to ignore a giant black dot growing in the sky. But we still don't know *why* it's there, right?"

"No... We're trying to investigate, though," Renge said.

"Renge... What was it like when the Sugula first appeared?" I asked.

I was a bit scared to ask, but I figured I should anyway. Renge's expression turned grim...or rather, severe.

"It all started when a person we call the first alchemist created a Kaguya with a will of its own. After it was created, Kamila started forming across the land more frequently and stimulated the Kathra. That made the monsters multiply and become larger. When the Sugula first appeared in the sky, the humans, demi-humans, and Mythical Beasts were preoccupied with handling the immediate threat of the monsters.

"And in the meantime, the Sugula became large enough to cover the entire sky. The Kaguya with a will of its own—or the Dwarf inside the Bottle, as we called it—said it made the Sugula

because it wanted a body of its own... But I burned it to death. So it shouldn't exist anymore. I don't think there's any record of how it was made, either."

"You don't *think*?"

"I mean, after that, the Sugula rained vast amounts of Kaguya on the planet's surface...destroying all cities and civilization without a trace. Do you think any records would remain after *that*?"

...He had a point there. Only the well of Renge's old home remains to this day. And the Lost Regalia ruins only had the foundations of houses left. But that made me curious about the Kaguya...

"You said the Kaguya destroyed civilization... But what is it actually?" Dad asked.

"It's like a black...mucus. When it fell down, it was like a bubbling slime, about ten inches in size. It'd approach humans and animals and then swallow them up to replicate itself," Renge explained. "It could transform into the shape of anything it consumed, but it mostly just imitated the things it saw... It was also tougher than monsters, since there weren't many ways of defeating it. Cutting it just split it in half and made it multiply. And unlike the monsters, it wasn't satisfied with just killing its prey. It devoured everything. Monsters, buildings, people...everything."

Dad was stunned speechless.

"I-Isn't that, like, even worse than a monster?!" Nakona cried, her eyes wide.

I was holding back tears myself. *The Kaguya sounds awful!*

"It's worse, yes. I mean...the Kaguya is the primordial punishment. If the Kathra is primordial sin given form, the Kaguya is the embodiment of divine punishment. And punishments are meant to hurt, right?"

I suppose he's right, but...that thing eats buildings and living things alike! And whenever it does, it replicates itself... Does that mean it copies itself? Imagine getting caught up in that... That's probably how the cities and countries were consumed in the past. But how are you supposed to beat something that splits in two and multiplies when you cut it...? The people back then were amazing...

"The only way we could kill it was to burn it away with magic. The Elven King... Oh, today they call him the Olden King, right? Anyway, he was known as the Elf of the Sun. He rained massive fireballs from the sky that burned the Kaguya away. I was in the

east, and he handled the west...

"It took years to destroy all of them, so we had to split up and evacuate other living beings to the further continents. Those became the demi-human and Mythical continents. The human continent was in the center, and our fire drove all the Kaguya here, where we burned it all down... After that, life returned to these empty lands. And that's why the Olden King became known as the Elf of the Sun."

"Huh? But wait..." Nakona said. "If what you're saying is true, you're all kinds of awesome!"

"*Hm?* Well, compared to most humans..."

"No, that doesn't sum it up!"

...Yeah, I don't think it's as simple as that! I mean, the Elf of the Sun has such a huge story behind his name! Which means that Shida, as his heir, must be one amazing sorcerer! And Renge worked with him to burn away the Kaguya?! That's crazy!

"Y-You..." Dad gawked at him. "You have *that* much history behind you?! Why don't humans know more about you?!"

"Who knows...? I don't think there's any point in asking me that. I just did what Leishi—the Olden King, that is—asked me to do... And the fact of the matter is, we *did* ruin countless civilizations..."

Uh-oh, Renge's going into his nervous mode... I need to change the topic!

"So, erm, Nakona, about that... While we're away in the Mythical continent, we—"

"I want to come with you!" Nakona cut me off.

"I thought you might say that, but we can't leave Renémoné and Mujimuji all alone here, right?" I countered.

"Oh, r-right..."

We can't really take these kids along with us, can we? We're not going on a trip. We'll be going to the Mythical continent, the most mysterious land in the world! And we only just reopened the inn after all our renovations. We can't just leave it unattended. Sure, we might not get too many customers, but we can't slack off! Another group could show up tomorrow!

"Well, don't worry about it too much. I think we'll be back in a day," Renge said nonchalantly.

"Huh?! How's that possible?!" we all gasped in unison.

Just one **day**?! That made no sense! It took a month to get

here from Saikorea in the east! And now the roads were blocked off, too... Even if we flew, it still didn't add up!

"...Also, we should probably discuss what happens after you gain the Stella," Renge continued.

"What happens after...?" Dad asked. "Didn't you say that once it has a host, it should purify the monsters on its own?"

"Yes, but it has a limited range."

A limited range... I suppose it makes sense. I'm pretty small, after all. I can't imagine the entire continent getting purified just by me staying put. And he did say the purification would take a few decades...

"We won't know what Tina's range will be until she absorbs the Stella, but I don't think it'll be that large. It'll be a few dozen yards, at most."

"That's it?!" Nakona and I cried in unison.

"That's not very large at all!" Dad shouted.

I mean, I expected around half a mile. Maybe a mile! And maybe that was expecting a lot... But a few yards is about the size of that zombie we faced. Any fast monsters could get away from me in no time! Unless it makes them go poof the second they touched it like a bug zapper...

"No, it's not, and that's why I have a suggestion. We can place a monster-attracting barrier in the World's Navel and have Tina stay there."

"A monster-attracting barrier...?" Dad repeated. "You don't mean..."

"Yes, it's exactly what the name implies. A barrier that draws monsters to it. And with Tina there, they'll be automatically purified."

"But won't that put Tina in danger?" Dad asked.

"We'll keep her safe. But the real danger isn't the monsters. It's the people."

"...The people?"

Dad and Nakona clammed up and hung their heads. I thought back to De Marl. When Dad was at Sir Dir's cremation, Nakona and I were approached for a very simple reason. Yes, an incredibly simple reason...

People were scared De Marl's knight orders might be falling apart, so they were trying to curry favor with Dad. Dad's a former knight vice-captain, and they think he still has some latent political power. So they approached us, his daughters, to strengthen their

bond with him. And Dad really is trusted by the Azure Knights.

When we went to De Marl, people from other knight orders were relying on him too. He's actually a really big deal. For better and for worse, a lot of people want Dad to come back to De Marl. And that's why we have to live while being cautious of "people". And me gaining the Stella would just give even more people reason to go after me.

"I see what you mean..." Dad said finally. "So where is this 'World's Navel'?"

"Here," Renge said, spreading out a map and tapping on it. He tapped on a spot right around the middle of the human continent.

"Dad! This map has the Mythical continent on it!" I cried.

"Really?! Where did you get this map?!" Dad asked Renge intensely.

"Mm? On the Mythical continent..."

"They sell maps there?! Do you have some kind of civilization, then?!" Dad couldn't hide his shock.

"Huh?" Renge looked taken aback, almost offended. "Are you mocking us? Of *course* we do! We don't have cities, per se, but we gather to hold a festival once a year on the day of Curalius's birth. And Mythical Beasts who take human shape sell clothes and goods like the rest of the world."

"I was sure that... I mean, most of the people who went to the Mythical continent never came back..." Dad sputtered.

"Most of them died at sea," Renge explained. "There's a sea dragon called Lenne in the waters, and whenever it stirs, it causes tidal waves. Even without intending to, it can crush human ships into driftwood."

"....."

"Crush..."

"Driftwood..."

I'd heard that sailing through the eastern seas could be very difficult. The currents were rough, and the waves were very high. But all of that was because of...a Mythical Beast living in the waters? A dragon called *Lenne*...! Talk about a large-scale problem...!

"Oh! B-But we were talking about the World's Navel, weren't we...?" Dad said apologetically.

"Oh! Right, right!" I apologized.

No good, we're getting off track. I'll admit the dragon thing makes

me curious, though. I never played many video games, but I do know what dragons are. Like...Komodo dragons with wings, right? It sounds like Renge knows this dragon, too. Could he introduce us?

"Anyways," Renge cleared his throat, "the World's Navel is here."

"Here...? Wait, isn't this Fort Deshmel?! That's an Edesa Kura fortress!" Dad cried, his eyes wide with surprise.

"It's a spot where the leylines intersect. It's a perfect spot for laying down a monster repelling barrier. But if we invert it, it'll become a monster-attracting barrier. When I was looking the place over, I *did* see there was a castle there. I'm guessing that's this Fort Deshmel? I asked to have it taken care of. I assume it's already fallen."

"You asked...who?" Dad stared at him, shocked. "And...Fort Deshmel fell...? How...?"

Dad seemed to be in a state of panic, and Nakona and I were equally confused by what Renge was talking about.

Meanwhile, Renge crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes, which made him seem like an ordinary, handsome man, until he went and said, "I had Revi and the others get rid of Edesa Kura's people."

But wait, isn't that a fortress? Like, a military outpost, used for national defense...? And he talks about emptying it out like washing the dishes...? And this is Edesa Kura we're dealing with here, right?

"It's...fallen...?" Dad whispered again, shocked.

He looked shocked that this fort he'd attacked a few times in his years as a knight, and never managed to topple, was defeated so easily. It must've been a really impressive place.

"I-I mean, it's a fortress, right? And you're telling me to stay there...? To *live* in a fortress?" I asked.

"It's called a fortress, but it's essentially a castle built in Edesa Kura's architectural style," Dad replied. "The previous King Kura was a skilled warmonger and used that castle as his seat of power to expand his domain. But the current king is more occupied with alchemy and uses mechanized soldiers and automatons to bolster his army. When it comes to actual war, he's an amateur, and their territory has grown smaller. They were even saying they'll be tearing down part of the fort since it's not necessary anymore..."

"Yes... I think what you're saying is about right." Renge nodded. "Their original domain's leylines have all run dry since

they sucked up all the Air from there. I can only guess they used it for alchemy..."

"What?" Dad asked, the color draining from his face.

I felt my heart sink. *They've run their leylines' Air dry...? That's not normal.* When Shida taught me about setting up the barrier around Rofola, he told me a bit about leylines. Spherits don't just travel through the air; they also move through the ground. And when those Spherits run out of Air, they extract it from the earth.

Since humans have created false gods and worshipped them, they polluted the leylines' Air with Kamila, making it lose its potency and purity. And to compensate for that loss in purity, the Air travels through the leylines along the earth's crust to purify itself at the hands of the creator god Air.

Put simply, leylines are places where relatively pure and unpolluted Air gathers. And Edesa Kura...drained a leyline of all its Air.

"What happened to the leyline, then?"

"It'll take about a hundred years or so for that leyline to become active again."

"Oh no..."

The Air's purity is going down as it is, so how could they do that to a leyline?! What's that country's problem?!

"What in the world are those damned fools doing...?" Dad murmured, apparently thinking the same thing as me.

"Even *we've* felt the need to start investigating them," Renge intoned gravely. "It feels like they're doing something bad to the world... We should've started looking into them when they destroyed Jiera thirteen years ago. I must say I regret we didn't."

"Doesn't De Marl have any idea what they're doing, Dad?" Nakona asked.

"They just say they're a country of oil and smoke. I don't know how things are run there right now, though," Dad said. "I served back when the current king only just took the throne. The last king was a skilled tactician and managed to conquer a lot of land. He conquered Saikorea in the east and Uru Ki in the south in no time at all.

"But when the current king took over, those countries were able to regain their land and declare independence... Anyway, the new king mass-produces mechanized soldiers and automatons to maintain his tyrannical rule. His goal is to make a world of human

supremacy, as per the teachings of their god Kura. Only Edesa Kura's people are treated fairly under his rule, and other countries are forced into slavery. And they call *that* human supremacy...!"

Dad's right; that isn't human supremacy at all. What, are they saying you're not human if you don't worship their god? And I'm sure there are people out there who'd choose to convert over becoming slaves. I'm sure most people would. If I was in that position, I'd at least pretend to believe in their faith.

"I don't understand human politics all that well, but that country is definitely making things worse," Renge continued. "Us Mythicals do intend to deal with them appropriately once we get a grasp on the situation. We'll give these forgetful humans a taste of sympathy and pain they won't easily forget. Humans have a habit of not remembering things, after all, but pain has a way of cementing things."

"H-Hmph," Dad looked at him suspiciously. "Are you saying you Mythicals are willing to stick your necks into human affairs?"

"What interests me is keeping the world alive. It only makes sense to remove any harmful factors that could obstruct that," Renge said darkly.

I fell silent. This was the first time I'd seen Renge so angry. Nakona shrank in place, a bit fearful. But Renge probably regretted what he'd just said because the anger in his eyes soon gave way to sadness.

Yes, Renge. That's the kind of person you are.

"So are you Mythicals going to destroy Edesa Kura?" Dad asked.

"If we deem it necessary," Renge replied curtly.

"That country's already killed thousands...tens of thousands," Dad told him gravely. "They cast untold millions of people into despair."

"So long as these matters remain between humans, we've no reason to intervene." Renge shook his head.

Dad fell silent. What Renge said must've bothered him. *Still, I can't help but hate Edesa Kura. I don't know what they're doing, which just makes them all the more incomprehensible to me, but I resent them on a basic level. I want them to pay for what they did.*

...But that doesn't mean I want to see them destroyed altogether. And I don't think Renge wants that, either. He ruined the world by burning down the Kaguya to save people. And in the process, he must've

burned down civilizations the humans and demi-humans of the time built...

It must've been a painful thing to do. I couldn't bring myself to do that...in more ways than one.

"Hey, Renge... You said I need to live in that fortress, right?"

"You can visit it or live there. That's up to you. The only thing that matters is that someone with the Stella resides in the World's Navel."

"Huh? What's with that?" Nakona regarded him with disbelief. "That's the same as living there! And if Tina's moving there, so am I —"

"Nakona, calm down," Dad scolded her. "Who's going to take care of the inn if you're gone?"

"Aah..." Nakona hung her head.

That's what our problems boil down to, honestly. I don't know how to feel about Renge and his friends wrenching Fort Deshmel out of Edesa Kura's grasp. I mean, Edesa Kura obviously wouldn't leave just because someone asked them to...and even if they did, what comes next? I just live there after I gain the Stella's power? Do I have to move there?

I've lived on my own back in my past life, but I like my life here in the inn. Having to change my lifestyle for good is what I'm nervous about.

"Maybe it's time to close this place up..." Dad sighed. "Tina was planning on moving to Saikorea or Forestria anyway, after all..."

"Dad, you can't!" I stopped him. "This is the last place people can rest on the way to Fei Lu!"

"Ugh, I guess that's true..."

Maybe people traveling on horseback didn't have it as bad. But for those going to Fei Lu by foot, the Rofola Lodge was the only place they could rest after a long trek. The next inn was a two-week walk from here, and people would have to camp out the whole time until they got there.

The Rofola Lodge is too important; we can't close it. And Dad knows how important of a place this is. Even if we haven't been getting a lot of travelers recently...

"I'm not saying you can never come home," Renge told us. "The first four or five years might be taxing, but once we get rid of ten thousand or so monsters, I think it'll be no problem for you to come back here from time to time. And you have us, so it'll only

take an hour or so to come back to Rofola.”

“A-An hour...?!” Dad stuttered in disbelief.

“That *can't* be right!” Nakona shouted.

“.....”

Ah, Dad and Nakona aren't listening to him, and Renge's just frowning at them as if he wants to say, “At least let me explain, stubborn humans!” And I mean, I believe him! He took us to the peak of Mount Rofola in the blink of an eye!

I do believe you, Renge!

“A-Anyway, Nakona,” I said, bringing things back on track. “Now that Mister Giyaga's left...I think I'll go to the Mythical continent to inherit the Stella...”

“O-Okay...”

A lock of hair swinging atop Nakona's head like a feeler wilted down evocatively. She must really want to come with me. But we can't leave Renémoné and Mujimuji behind unattended. And customers might come.

“Fine,” Nakona eventually said. “But you *have* to tell me what it was like when you get back!”

“Yes, I will,” I promised.

“And Dad, if you're taking Tina along, I'm counting on you to look after her.”

“...Yeah.”

That settled it. Tomorrow, Dad and I would set out for the unknown lands of the Mythical continent. The eastern end of the world. And Renge said it'd only take a day, but...

“.....”

Can I really inherit the Stella? I'm worried about what'll happen next. But I've already decided I'll do it. I'll inherit the Stella, for Dad's sake. And for the rest of the world... After all, Renge saved this world once before, and that's how I'm here. So I have to do what I can...



THE following morning, we prepared for our journey after breakfast. Then I went outside, where I found Dad and Renge ready to go. Nakona left the cleaning up to Renémoné and came out to say goodbye.

We told the little ones that we were off to gather tonic

ingredients. I didn't think they'd understand what being a Spherit Folk meant or what the Stella was...

"So, how are you gonna be getting there?" Nakona asked. "You mentioned flying."

"Could you step away?" Renge requested, taking a few steps away from us.

We did as he said. Then a black mist began seeping from Renge and enveloping his body. The mist spread several yards around him, hanging over the area like a fog, and then it swelled.

"A-Aaah..." I couldn't help but utter that surprised noise.

What looked like sparks crackled through the black mist. Then a large, black hound appeared where Renge had stood just moments ago. It had the toned, thick legs of a wolf and three wagging tails. It had three eyes—one of them in the center of its forehead—and it was about twenty feet tall, if not a little bigger.

"*Maybe I'm a bit too large for you,*" it spoke in Renge's voice. "*Anyway, get on my back.*"

"S-So this is your true form?" Dad asked.

"*Oh, no. I'm actually a little bigger.*"

"Really?!" Nakona replied, surprised. "And you two are gonna ride him? You're not gonna shake them off, are you?"

"*Of course not. Now, get on.*"

Renge sat down like a sphinx and yawned. I was surprised he could get even bigger than this. But I remembered seeing him in this form. He was about the size of a normal wolf when he saved me as a baby.

"Y-Your nose is wet. T-Too cute..." I cooed, going into gushing mode.

"The heck, Tina?" Nakona quipped at me.

Oh, come on! I spent my whole past life living in an apartment, so even though I really wanted a dog, I could never have one. It's kind of a wish I never had granted. And I mean, Mujimuji isn't exactly cute. Er, well, it's kind of adorably ugly, but we still don't know what it actually is.

"L-Let's go, Tina," Dad urged me, nervously getting on Renge's back.

"Ah, okay! We'll be back soon, Nakona."

"Yeah, just be careful..." Nakona said. "And Renge...you better bring Dad and Tina back safely, you hear?"

"*I certainly will.*"

Dad stretched his hand down to me and I took it. He pulled me up and then wrapped his arms around my waist to hold me tightly in place. His expression was exceptionally stiff.

"I never thought the day would come where I rode on a Mythical's back..."

"Are you all right, Dad?" I asked.

"I'm f-f-f-f-fine," he said wearily.

You *don't* look *fine*! Personally, I found Renge's back to be fluffy and convenient, and it kind of made my heart skip a beat in... another way. Could I call this his back fur? It had two layers. The top layer was rough, but it was soft below that!

I kind of want to bury my face in his fur...! And it smells like the yupiter flower soap I transmute! I guess he's been using it...

I'd been putting soap in the guest rooms so they could use it, but since we had so few customers these days, word about it hadn't gotten out. I'd been hoping that it could become a popular rumor and draw in customers just like the candy I made.

"Let's go, then," Renge told us.

"Y-Yeaaaah!" Dad said, a bit more loudly than he probably intended.

"Yes, let's go," I cheered.

Is Dad really going to be all right...? Since I was so worried about Dad, I forgot...

"...!"

The large hound floated up. The ground grew distant before my eyes, and everything below us looked tiny.

How did I forget something so important?!

I'm afraid of heights!

I curled my right hand around Dad's arm and leaned forward as I tightly grabbed onto the hound's fur with my left hand. Given Renge's size, my legs didn't reach the ground anyway, but the weightless feeling of floating only made me feel worse!

"T-Tina, are you okay?!" Dad asked, noticing my mounting panic.

"Don't talk to me right now!" I rushed out.

"S-Sorry..."

I can tell. I just can. If I raise my head now, something terrible will happen. How long until we get to the Mythical continent ...?! I was about to ask Renge, when suddenly...

"We're here."

“Wha?!” I squeaked.

“That *can't* be right!” Dad cried.

I looked up. All around us were plants I'd never seen before and large trees covered with thick foliage and creeping vines. I saw what looked like large fireflies flutter through the air here and there, their backsides alight.

Black mist covered Renge's body and his form began to shrink. As we sat on his back dumbfounded, Renge trotted onward. *H-Huh?! What happened?!*

“What's going on?!” I finally asked, unable to bear it any longer.

“I used teleportation magic,” he replied casually.

“Teleportation magic? Magic can do *this?!?*”

“Well, yes... The demi-humans can use it, too, but it's probably too difficult for humans. I could teach you, if you want. Remember how I said you don't need to think too hard about moving out of the inn? This is what I meant...”

“You can teach me how to do this?!”

“Yes. I think you can probably pull it off too, Tina.”

Teleportation magic... That's awesome! If I can use that, then distance won't be a factor anymore! This is as cool as if we just added ten new rooms to the inn! And he says I can probably use it just fine, too! That's incredible!

Except...

“Why didn't you say anything yesterday?” Dad asked him with a frown.

“I didn't think you'd believe me.”

Dad and I looked away at the same time.

Y-Yeah... If Renge had said yesterday that he could just teleport us in the blink of an eye, Dad and Nakona would have thought he was talking nonsense. I'd have probably believed him since he brought me to the peak of Mount Rofola like that... At least, I think I'd believe him.

“S-So, this is the Mythical continent?” Dad asked wearily.

“The very heart of it. We can meet the great Curalius here. She's very kind. So don't worry.”

“What? Right now?!” My eyes widened in surprise.

“Yes. We're running out of time, after all.”

I mean, I get that, but I'm not ready for things to move this quick...!

"King Curalius, I've brought them," Renge said.

"W-We're already there?!"

Renge squatted down, and we slid off his back. My legs touched what looked like soft grass, but I felt water shift underneath it. *It's floating on the surface of a lake... Is this lotus?*

Huh?! L-Lotus?! These are lotus leaves?! But when did we get to the middle of a lake?!

"Awawawa?!" I panicked.

"What's wrong?" Renge asked.

"We're on leaves floating on the water!"

"Don't worry, they won't sink."

"How're you so sure about that?!"

"Forget that, I think you should be greeting the great Curalius instead. You're being irreverent."

Dad was also clinging to Renge's back, his face pale. But abiding by Renge's words, he looked up. All around us was a clear lake. At its heart was a large stump, with lotus leaves and flowers floating around it. There was light all around us, which was probably Air filled with high-density mana.

And then my eyes met a pair of dull green eyes. They narrowed upon seeing me. Sitting curled up on the stump was a large dragon, looking like its scales had been torn off. My eyes met the dragon's, but it...probably couldn't see me.

"Is she...blind?" I asked Renge.

"Hehehe... No, it's just age," the dragon replied.

She was probably a beautiful, pure white dragon back in the day. She moved her face toward me and let out a single, long breath from her snout. And it almost seemed like even doing that much was tiresome for her...

"My apologies for my appearance. My name is Curalius. I am the ruler of this continent... And as you can see, I haven't much time left."

"....."

"Ah...I can tell even without being able to see you. Such clear mana... It's like Akari has come to see me again. Are you Tinaris? I will be leaving you with quite the bothersome role to play. But are you prepared to take it?"

"...Ah... Y-Yes!" I said, fumbling over my words.

So this is what Renge meant when he said there's no time left... I turned around anxiously, only to find Renge had returned to human form. The lotus leaves moved across the water's surface, forming a

road toward Curalius. Renge signaled with his eyes that I should cross it.

I clenched my fists. *Right. I've already come this far...!*

"I'm off," I said.

"Y-Yeah." Dad nodded.

I walked across the lotus leaves. It felt like they sunk ever so slightly under my weight, but they still felt safe and solid enough to walk on. The dragon got bigger and bigger the closer I got to it. She was larger and more dignified than I imagined, even elegant in a way.

I reached the foot of the stump and climbed up a small step... finding myself in front of the dragon's snout. Standing in front of this magnificent creature was overwhelming. It felt like the flurry of butterflies fluttering in my stomach just doubled in size.

"Renge has told me of you. The last remaining Spherit Folk in the world. You coming here...must be fate."

"...Fate..."

Is it really? I suppose it does feel like that, but I also can't help but feel like my coming here is awfully mundane in its own way. All I did was survive and live on, and now I'm told I'm the best possible host for the Stella.

And yet, it does feel like there's something preordained to all of this. If being picked up by Dad and meeting Renge again is fate, too... then I can't say fate is all that bad.

"Um, is there anything I should be careful about when it comes to the Stella?" I asked Curalius.

"Hm? Careful...? W-Well I'll be, hehehe... That's an amusing question. No, there is not. Use it as you will. I believe the Stella is at its best when used in accordance with a maiden's heart. You resemble Akari closely, so I'm sure it would be best left in your hands."

"...O-Okay?"

Akari? Who? Is she talking about Saint Akari-Berz? No way...

"Um, excuse me, but who is Akari?" I asked.

"I believe the humans call her Akari-Berz..."

"So it really is her! But...why is her name different...?"

"Long ago, this world's culture was different. I imagine the people of the present-day call her such with affection. A saint...yes, she was a woman worthy of that name. And yet, she was but an ordinary girl. A simple human woman."

A saint who was but an ordinary person... I can't really wrap my

head around that. But it's strange, because somehow, I can kind of understand what Curalius means.

And plus, Akari's name feels different from this world's culture. She wasn't actually someone who reincarnated into this world like me, was she? It'd be a pity if she was...

"Tinaris. The Stella will be yours from now on. Use it as you see fit. And please... save this world. Guide the lives that survive in this world to the next age..."

"King Curalius..."

"And Renge...I think it's about time you come up with an answer, too..."

"Please don't drag *that* up in the middle of all this," Renge said with a frown. "I'm not the right one for it. I'll support everyone until Revireus grows old enough, so don't worry."

"There is no one stronger than you in this world right now. And the king of the Mythical Beasts must always be the strongest of us. I do not believe Revireus would ever become stronger than you. You are most fit to be the next king of the Mythical Beasts."

"Don't wanna," Renge said like a defiant child.

"...Um, what are you talking about...?" I asked in a feeble voice.

Is it just me, or did the conversation start going in a really weird direction? Curalius basically used me as a segue to...tell Renge to become the next king of the Mythical Beasts?! Renge's the strongest being in the world?! Is he really that big a deal?!

I mean, the story he told us yesterday doesn't sound all that realistic, but still! Curalius just nominated him as king!? Huuuh!? I was struggling to keep up with the sudden shift in topic.

"Well, since you feel well enough to drag *that* up, I'm guessing you're still healthy enough," Renge told Curalius sarcastically. "Just give it up."

"Tinaris, won't you talk some sense into him?" Curalius turned to me.

"M-Me?!"

What am I supposed to say?! Tell him to become king?! I can't do that! No, no...!

"Don't bring Tina into this. You *still* haven't done what we've come here for."

"Such a pity. But yes...for now, I should hand the Stella over to Tinaris. I'm sure you'll be capable of putting it to good use."

“Wait...ah...”

The dragon suddenly blew air out of its snout at me. *It's her breath, but it smells...kind of nice?!* The air pressure made me close my eyes. But I felt something strange, and that, coupled with the pleasant smell, made me open my eyes.

“Huh?”

Next thing I knew, I was standing in a flower field. A large flower field that seemed to span as far as the eye can see, far larger than the one in the mountain behind the inn. How did I get here? I was in front of Curalius just a second ago, with the lotus leaf pond behind me. But now I was somewhere else, and Dad and Renge were nowhere to be seen...

What is this place? Where am I?!

“Are you...the next host of the Stella?”

Someone's standing behind me!

“H-Hello?!”

I turned around in surprise to find myself facing a girl with short, pink hair with orange tips. *It can't be...!*

“...Are you...the Holy Woman, Akari-Berz?” I asked.

No, she can't be...

“Mm?” The girl furrowed her brow. “No, I'm just Akari. I'm not sure what you mean by 'Berz'...”

...Curalius did say that's how she was called after the fact... So wait, is this really her?! Wh-Wh-What?! What's going on here? I looked around, but all I saw was a field of flowers.

“And isn't Berz the king's last name?” she asked me.

“Uh, the king?” I parroted dumbly.

“Yes, yes.” She nodded with a smile. “I don't think I have anything to do with the person you're looking for.”

“...O-Oh, I'm sorry...”

Did she mean...a human king? Did some king decide to say she was his wife after she'd made her great achievements and her name went down in history as Akari-Berz? I hope not! If it wasn't done with her consent, that's terrible...

No, I shouldn't be thinking about this right now...

“I don't know how long it's been since I died... I hope Renge's doing well. Oh...do you know Renge?”

“What? Oh, yes, I've met him. He's fine.”

Renge? Saint Akari-Berz—or rather, Akari—knows Renge? I guess he was alive when she was active...

“Oh, really!” Lady Akari smiled softly. “I’m so glad to hear that...”

“.....”

She looks legitimately relieved, and even...affectionate...?

“Tch...”

Wh-What? Why do I feel uneasy? My heart feels heavy...

“That’s the one thing I really wanted to know,” Lady Akari told me. “Thank you for telling me.”

“O-Oh, don’t mention it.”

“I’ll give you the Stella, then!” she said, suddenly handing me a stone shining in a brilliant prismatic light.

“Already?!” I stared at the stone.

Wh-What is this? Is this the Stella? And she’s just handing it over?!



"I'm nothing more than the remnants of my consciousness that linger thanks to the Stone of Daybreak's power. So I'll probably disappear after this."

"What? The Stone of Day—"

"Is there anything you want to ask? I think I can only answer one question. We don't have much time..."

"You *know* about the Stone of Daybreak?! What in the world is it?" I asked, my voice coming out a little louder than I intended.

"You want to know about the Stone of Daybreak?" she repeated quizzically. "Well, it's a stone that can grant you any one wish, I suppose."

"It is...?!"

Lady Akari suddenly turned transparent.

"Oh, sorry... I think I'm about to disappear. I'm really sorry!"

"Ah, wait...!" I reached out to her.

"Tell Renge I said hello...!" Lady Akari told me, her voice fading.

"Lady Akari!"

A breeze blew through the flower garden. The view faded away, and with it, so did Lady Akari.

Wait! You can't drop a bombshell like this on me and just go away! A stone that can grant any wish?! What is this, Dragon Ball?!

"Ah!"

My eyes fluttered open.

"*I see you've accepted it.*"

I blinked a few times and my eyes refocused. I was standing in front of Curalius again. *I'm back to where I started? Where was I just a second ago...? And the Stone of Daybreak...can grant wishes?! What's that all about?!? I don't get it!*

Maybe Curalius knows...

"...Then I shall rest a bit... Forgive me," she said.

"Oh, umm...o-okay, you do that. Thank you so much. Good night!"

"*Hehe, thank you... Do watch over...the world for me...*"

"....."

The dragon's large eyes slowly closed. She was really old. I wanted to ask about the Stone of Daybreak... *But maybe some other time*, I thought. I bowed to the dragon and returned to Dad and Renge. *I guess we completed our quest, even though it hasn't been an*

hour since we left Rofola...

"Tina, are you all right?! Do you feel funny anywhere?!" Dad approached me, flustered.

"Hmm...no, not really," I replied.

Dad anxiously inspected my hands and my face. *D-Don't freak out, Dad...*

"Are you sure nothing feels weird?" Renge asked me next. "You don't feel sleepy or heavy? Your head doesn't hurt? You're not depressed...?!"

"Nope, nothing."

Now Renge's worried about me, too?

"....."

Renge. I guess he knew Lady Akari. And apparently, she knew him well enough to regard him affectionately...by his given name.

For some reason, that thought hung over me like a dark cloud. *Is this the weird feeling Dad and Renge are talking about? Should I tell them?*

"My chest feels a little tight..." I confessed.

"Does it hurt?!" Dad looked at me, worried.

"You can't breathe?!" Renge eyed me with concern, as well.

"N-No. It's just kind of...gloomy."

"Renge! Can we have Tina rest somewhere?!" Dad turned sharply to Renge.

"There's an inn just around the corner, so to speak!"

And so, Renge guided us through the forest. Before long, we reached a strange archway. *Is this some kind of gate?* There was a bell hanging from its center.

"Once we pass through here, we'll be in town."

"You have *towns* on this continent?" Dad asked.

"Yes, we do... The inn's close by."

If I had to choose, I'd rather rest in my room, but I am curious what a Mythical Beast town looks like. We went down a hill, and both the hustle and bustle of people going about their business and the appetizing smell of food reached me. *Is this...?*

"Woow..."

Ahead of us was the sight of paved roads and a town neatly divided into blocks. Some residences had round roofs made of shining stone, while others were built into hollowed trees. I could see one house that looked like it was a cluster of soap bubbles... As orderly as this town was, the houses all looked completely different

from each other. Some of them were surrounded by flowers or vines, snow and ice, clouds and sand... *This is unbelievable!*

"Look at this place..." Dad murmured in disbelief, too.

"Curalia is the only town on this continent. Mythical Beasts from across the continent gathered here and formed a community," Renge explained. "If someone needs something, they just ask whoever lives in the area for help. The townspeople are representatives of two breeds of Mythicals, here for the sake of serving Curalius. Their sizes and lifestyles are all different, and that's why the houses are all so different."

"They're here to serve Curalius...? So, the people—erm, Mythicals—living here are all like servants to the king...?" I asked.

"Each of them takes a day to look after Curalius. So, I suppose it's closer to what humans call caretakers."

So, this is a town of caretakers for an elderly ruler? Everything looks well paved and clean, but all the houses being a hodgepodge of different designs makes it a pretty chaotic sight.

"The inn's over there." Renge pointed toward a building. "Are you all right? You need me to carry you?"

"I-I'm fine. I can walk."

Him looking at me only makes the gloom weigh heavier on my heart. I-I guess I really am feeling a little sick! This unease is only getting stronger. But I really don't like it; it's like when I used to always be depressed in my past life. I don't want to go through that again...

"...I want to eat something sweet," I said suddenly.

"You do?" Renge looked at me.

"Something sweet? R-Renge, do you have any sweets on this continent?"

"O-Oh, um, we have mousse fruit... Wait, I'll go buy some!"

Dad and Renge scrambled to fulfill my abrupt request. I didn't mean for them to do something about it. I was just...kind of depressed, so I got a craving for something sweet to cheer me up. I figured it'd perk me up, is all!

Renge ran off and quickly came back. He had small fruit in his hands that reminded me of plums and apricots. *I really didn't mean to scare them into getting me something!*

"Eat this, Tina. It's not as good as the sweets you make, but mousse fruit are nice and sweet," he said. "I'm sure it'll cheer you up."

"...Thank you."

His words made my throat seize up for a second, and I felt a gentle pain in my heart. I took one fruit and chewed on it. It had a juicy texture, like an apple, and tasted like peach. I'd never eaten a fruit like this before in my past life. But it was nice and small, so I liked it.

"It's good," I said.

"Really? That's great. I'll get you some more."

"Oh, no, it's fine!" I stopped Renge.

"I think she wants to rest at the inn for now," Dad suggested.

"O-Oh, okay."

Dad's a bit too worried about me, but I feel a little better now.

We followed Renge into a building built into a hollowed, twisted tree. This tree was so thick and tall that I couldn't see the top of it.

"Ooh, Master Renge, it's you! So good to see you!" the innkeeper said.

The innkeeper was a small, middle-aged-looking man who held a pipe and kept letting out little puffs of smoke from his mouth. He was a really...small, bald man. And half-naked, at that! He only had a white cloth covering his lower half. He bowed to greet us as we approached the counter.

"Save the greetings for later," Renge told him hurriedly. "Do you have a spare room? I want to let the girl I told you about rest."

"My! So it's her? Yes, yes, of course. Please, rest and enjoy yourself!"

"Th-Thanks..." I said a bit awkwardly and turned to Renge. "E-Erm, is he a Mythical too?"

"Oh? Yes, he's what we call a pygmy."

"A pygmy...!"

So pygmies are a kind of Mythical Beast? I knew my world was different from this one, but still...! I always had an image in my head that such fantastical littlefolk wore pointy hats and simple clothes and looked like children! But this one's a bald old man! And he even has a bit of a gut...

"Tina? What's wrong? Are you feeling gloomy again?" Dad asked me.

"No, no. It's fine, he didn't do anything wrong..."

That's just my preconceived notion, after all. The old pygmy man didn't do anything wrong...I think.

"Right this way to your room, Saint," I heard a voice behind

me say.

“Eep!”

It made my skin crawl! *Is that another pygmy innkeeper?!* But when I turned around, I was faced with a tiny, palm-sized girl... who had wings.

“This is a fairy,” Renge said.

“A fairy?!”

“This inn is run by pygmies and fairies,” Renge explained.

“Welcome, Master Renge, Holy Woman. And you too, filthy human,” she greeted us, suddenly shooting Dad a sharp, cold glare.

“Hey, what’s with the hostility?!” Dad exclaimed.

“Don’t talk to me! Your breath stinks,” the fairy snapped at him.

“S-Sorry...?”

Wow, the fairy is greeting Dad with pure hate! How can someone so cute be so casually mean to Dad? And why?!

“I’ll get you something to drink in a moment,” she said to me. “Please wait inside your room.”

“Thank you...? O-Oh, and uh...could you get my dad a drink, too?”

“Pardon...?” The fairy stared at me for one long moment. “...If you need me to.”

What was that pause just now? She’s acting as if I just asked her to treat a cockroach like a guest.

“Is it because I’m human?” Dad asked Renge after she left.

“Edesa Kura gave humans a bad name among Mythical Beasts...even though they *know* humans aren’t all bad.”

So it’s all Edesa Kura’s fault?! Damn that country...!

“...Forget it. Tina, just rest for now,” Dad told me.

“Y-Yeah, I guess I should...”

Renge opened the door to the room the fairy had led us to. It was a simple door, but it was made of some kind of blue wood that seemed to shine. The whole room seemed to use this same kind of wood, which granted it a blue glow. *It’s like we’re underwater.*

The furniture and fixtures all had unique shapes and designs, too. *How do you even use this twisted...shelf?*

“Oh, at least the bed is normal— Ack!”

“Tina, what’s wrong— Ack!”

“What’s gotten into you two?” Renge asked.

I went into the room first and Dad came in behind me. But

when we went in, we froze up as we saw countless fairies plastered to the windowpanes by the bed. And all of them were female fairies. And since we'd frozen up, Renge couldn't come into the room and see what we did...

"What's *with* that woman? Is she human?"

"Who *is* that woman...?"

"I saw Master Renge pull her by the arm!"

"What?! We can't have that!"

"How do we deal with her? Execution?"

"Get out of here, human woman..."

"Get too close to Master Renge, and you'll meet a death most painful..."

Their voices all sounded resentful, as if they were cursing my very existence. *Is Renge really that popular?!*

"Mm?" Renge poked his head around Dad's back.

And when he did, the fairies let out screeches that sounded loud enough to shatter the glass. The glass actually shook, and Renge's face turned immediately expressionless.

"Master Rengeeee!"

"Look at me! Oh, our eyes met!"

"Wrong! He looked *me* in the eye, not you!"

"Marry me! Be my husband!"

"Hiiii! Renge, you're so lovely today!"

"Hug meeeeeeee!"

How are their voices so shrill?! It's making my ears ring! What is this, a teen idol's concert?!

"H-Hey, what do we do about that...?" Dad asked uncomfortably.

"Ignore them," Renge said dispassionately. "Well, I suppose you can't; they're too loud... I'll go outside. You two rest up."

"R-Right. Looks like you've got it tough..."

Renge cradled his head and looked very annoyed. He left the room, getting a sympathetic pat on the shoulder from Dad as he went. With him gone, the fairy girls all disappeared from the window with a pop.

Talk about being instantly effective.

"Is he really *that* popular?" Dad wondered aloud.

"Well...he is cute," I said.

"Bwah?!"

He's pretty gloomy on the inside, though. But, I mean, Curalius

asked him to become the next king of the Mythicals. So yeah, he'd be popular. He's got the looks. He's strong. He's very responsible...and that sense of responsibility is probably why the king's crown feels so heavy to him.

I can relate to that, I think. Well, except for the 'becoming king of the beasts' thing.

"C-Cute, huh...?"

"Forget that, Dad!" I looked at him firmly. "There's something I want to try!"

"What now?" He stared at me.

"Don't you remember? What I told you..." I said, gently touching Dad's right arm.

It felt hard and cold. Dad's expression stiffened in surprise.

"Are you serious? Listen, I..."

"I told you I want to do this to thank you. You raised me for so long, and I love you for that... Though I don't think this'll be enough to pay back the gratitude I feel."

"Tina, now's not the time."

"But I—"

"We don't know if taking that power in hasn't affected you yet, do we? Just rest. If everything's *really* all right, you can do it then."

"....."

He's just saying that to placate me. Grrrr... Still, I guess he's not wrong. I should probably rest. The Stella's said to influence the host's psyche, whether it's in a human's body or a Spherit Folk's. And my heart did feel gloomy. It still does, actually. If anything, it's gotten a little worse...

"Go on, lie down," Dad urged me to the bed.

"I think you're making a big fuss over nothing..." I mumbled.

As I sat on the bed, we heard a knock on the door.

"I've brought your drinks," a childlike voice called to us from behind the door.

Oh, it's that fairy from earlier. She works for this inn, but is she a fan of Renge, too?

Dad opened the door, and I saw the small fairy, holding up a tray much larger than her. It had three cups on it.

"Oh? Where's Master Renge...?"

"He said he was going outside," Dad said. "Did you miss him on his way out?"

"Yes. That's a pity. I wanted to chat with him..."

I felt the gloom blooming in my heart get a little bigger. Yes, *she's a fan of his.*

"Here you are, Saint," she said, fluttering over to me with the tray. "This is our inn's specialty, Yuj Juice."

"Thank you... Um, by 'Saint,' do you mean...me?" I asked.

"Yes! You inherited the Stella, right? I mean, you have by now, right? Saint Akari used it to purify the world three thousand years ago. If *you* inherited it, that makes you the next Saint... So, of course, we must address you appropriately," the fairy said, puffing up with pride.

I was at a loss for words.

Her confident eyes stared at me, and honestly, I couldn't stand to look back. *Do I tell her I'm not actually a saint or some holy woman?*

"Um, I—"

But just as I accepted the glass and looked up to talk to her...

"...!"

"...Tch!"

The fairy and Dad's faces were colored with shock. The sounds outside changed to something more chaotic. The two of them glared out the window, squinting like they were trying to make out what was going on outside.

"A monster!"

"Kyaaaaa!"

A monster?!

I opened the window, and Dad and the fairy leaned out to look. *But the monsters ought to be purified just by being next to me now that I have the Stella...!*

"It's Master Renge!"

I could see a horned horse looking up at the sky. Renge jumped onto a mushroom-shaped rooftop as a gigantic black bird swooped down from above. *It's spewing out a black mist—that's definitely a monster!*

"Renge—" I called out.

I was about to tell him I'd handle it, but Renge thrust out his hands. Black flames shot out, hitting the monster like a beam of light. The flames shot through the monster's wings, tearing a large hole into them and sending it plummeting down.

Renge then grabbed the monster's beak, as if trying to silence its pained screech. He started swinging it around, holding the beak

all the while, and after one—two—three spins, let go of it like a shot-put. Losing its centrifugal force, the gigantic monster was sent flying the way it came.

I stood there, shocked beyond words.

“Is he for real...?” Dad uttered in disbelief.

“Oh, Master Renge! He’s so lovely!” the fairy cheered with a high-pitched screech.

The entire city seemed to cheer. A natural reaction to seeing a gigantic monster defeated with such ease.

But Renge’s back struck me as terribly...lonely, somehow. *Can’t he hear all that cheering?*

Then I saw a young man with white hair approaching Renge.

“Ah, that’s Master Shinsen!” the fairy exclaimed.

“Who’s that?” I asked.

“Master Renge’s retainer, Master Shinsen, the orthrus,” the fairy said with blushing cheeks, wiggling her body all the while. “When it comes to battle, he becomes so wild! He’s like another person whenever he fights.”

I could only manage to say a stupefied “Huh.”

What’s an “orthrus?” It’s probably some type of Mythical Beast. But I only know the famous kinds, like dragons, chimera, and griffins... I only just found out fairies and pygmies count as Mythicals, too.

“Ah!” the fairy raised her voice in glee.

Renge and this Master Shinsen person approached us. They floated down to the window we were leaning out of. *They really aren’t human, huh... I saw Shida fly, but I guess Renge can do it, too.*

“Sorry, Tina,” Renge apologized to me.

“Huh? Why?”

“I just got a report that Edesa Kura has dispatched a large army to the Caralus plains. De Marl, Uru Ki, and Saikorea are forming an alliance and gathering soldiers to organize a joint army to stop them.”

“...Okay?”

The Caralus plains are directly east of Fort Deshmel, right...?

There are two small countries you have to go through to reach Saikorea, and the Caralus plains are right in front of them.

And Edesa Kura sent an army there? Why?

“Who’s commanding them?” Dad asked, his expression grave.

He looked serious when we discussed the Stella, but now, he had the same face as when he fought the monsters back when I was

ten.

“Mephisto Gudil,” Renge replied.

“Mephisto of the Hundred Massacres?!” Dad growled, gritting his teeth.

That’s a scary title to have! I looked up at Dad in concern. His stern expression turned even angrier. *Whoever this commander is, he must be dangerous.*

“Given their marching speed, they’ll probably clash with the alliance army in two weeks,” Renge continued.

“They’re gonna clash head-on?!” I swallowed nervously.

“Who’s commanding the alliance army?” Dad asked.

“The commander of De Marl’s Crimson Knights. But 90 percent of Edesa Kura’s army is made up of automatons and mechanized soldiers.”

“Dammit! The cowards...!”

I didn’t exactly understand the situation. A head-on battle matched with my mental image of war from my world. But most of Edesa Kura’s army was automatons and mechanized soldiers, while the alliance army was made up of normal humans.

Yes, I can see why Dad calls them cowards! Their side never gets tired or fears death. Using alchemy for such a thing? That’s unforgivable!

“But that’s not the problem. We’ve confirmed that Edesa Kura’s war caravan has caged monsters with them.”

“Caged monsters? Why would they...” Dad was confused for a moment, but then his expression darkened. “No...!”

“What’s wrong?” I looked at him questioningly.

Caged monsters? What would they use them for? I mean, yes, catching them is safer in the long run than driving them away, but why carry them around?

“Listen, Tina,” Renge said. “If they start an all-out fight and the monsters get killed on that battlefield... What do you *think* is going to happen?”

“.....”

“The monsters would turn into Kathra...” I whispered.

“And Edesa Kura’s soldiers are mostly mechanical. So they won’t be affected... Those *bastards!*” Dad hissed angrily as he slammed his fist on the windowsill.

I was stunned. I shuddered and felt chills run through my body. *That’s awful. How can they even consider doing that? What, do*

they think they can just do anything because it's war? That's just wrong...!

"I'm going to have to ask you for something difficult, Tina," Renge said. "I need you to let your body get used to the Stella these next two weeks. Then I want you to help in this battle."

That's an absurd request! I knew that, but I still nodded. I mean, what they're doing is awful! And Lico's definitely part of the alliance army, along with Vector and Gawain. Who knows how many losses they'll take? The enemy's using monsters as shields—as weapons.

"So the reason they focused on mass-producing automatons..."

"Yes, it may well have been for this... Shinsen," Renge turned from Dad to his white-haired comrade.

"Yes, Master Renge," the young man descended to the same height as us.

Upon closer inspection, I realized his hair wasn't white but more ashen. Actually, his bangs covered half his face. *But...haven't I seen him somewhere before?*

"What about Deshmel?" Renge asked him.

"Revireus declared he'd be making it his residence and managed to wrest it from Edesa Kura's hands," Shinsen said. "Except...well, it's a little hard to say, but..."

"What?"

"He...half-destroyed the place..."

"....."

Renge pressed a hand against his temple, like he was trying to suppress a headache. Dad, who'd been tormented to no end by Fort Deshmel, had an incredulous expression on his face. *Half-destroyed? Fort Deshmel, driven to near ruin? How?* I could hear him thinking.

"Was there any loss of life?" Renge asked.

"The army was protected by mechanized soldiers, so there were probably no losses of life... I think...probably..." Shinsen replied, not sounding very confident.

That's awfully vague!

"Right. Well, it's Revi we're talking about. Half-destroying it is probably his idea of holding back... I guess it's within the acceptable margin of error, overall."

"R-Right!" Shinsen agreed, pumping his fists.

Huh... Half-destroying the place is acceptable...?

"But wait...just two weeks for her to get used to the Stella...?" Dad said, now glaring at Renge. "Renge, you're not thinking of

bringing her to the battlefield, are you?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll keep her safe,” Renge replied earnestly without a hint of shame.

That made my heart skip a beat. *I mean, he has to protect me. I understand he’s only doing this out of necessity. But still...this is Renge.* The right side of his cleanly cut hair fluttered in the wind and stuck out of his scarf.

He had pretty, straight black hair. His black eyes were fixed directly on Dad. Half his face was covered by that scarf, but I could see how fair his features were.

He’s that handsome. And when he says he’ll keep me safe... Well...you get it! It makes my heart swell. I can’t help it!

“Yes, I will protect the Saint too,” Shinsen said. “You can rest easy, father of the Holy Woman.”

“‘Holy Wo—?’ You mean Tina?” Dad asked.

“Indeed. This young woman is heir to the Stella. It’s only proper to call her by that title.”

“Y-You heard him, Tina.”

“Seriously?!” I looked up in shock.

Holy Woman. Saint. Right, I have to correct them before this spirals out of control!

“Um, I’m...” I started.

“A monster!” A scream from below us cut into my words.

Renge and Shinsen turned their eyes in the direction of the voice. We turned as well and found the large bird monster from before approaching again!

How?! Didn’t Renge blow it away earlier?!

“I guess it really is a White Rood...” Renge frowned.

“That’s bad,” Shinsen said gravely. “Those things travel in flocks.”

“We should probably assume there’s a dozen of them... Shinsen, contact Fugo and Shishirol and have them keep watch to the north and west. You go east, and I’ll stay here to guard the south.”

“At your command,” Shinsen said.

“Eure’s helping Revi out right now, right?”

“Yes.”

“He’ll be fine, then. I’m sorry, Tina! We’ll have to go back to Rofola a little later.”

“O-Oh, that’s fine. But...”

A White Rood... It looks like a giant swan. So it's a type of monster that moves in flocks and attacks people? That sounds terrible!

"B-Be careful," I told Renge.

"I will. Thanks."

Renge floated up into the air. That shifted his scarf a bit, giving me a clear view of his smile.

Aah! Hunks have it so easy, don't they?



"....."

The gloom and frustration in my heart felt even more oppressive. *What does "getting used to the Stella" even mean?*

It'd been a week since I returned to my everyday life in Rofola. Right now, I was in front of the inn, sweeping away fallen leaves. This world didn't have seasons, but after the chumil trees bear fruit, their leaves turn yellow and fall off. As I swept with the broom, I thought back to what Renge told me.

Edesa Kura's army was set to clash with the alliance army on the Caralus plains in a week. Wars, as it turns out, are pretty meticulously planned. Both sides decided on a day ahead of time and were using this time to prepare accordingly.

I don't understand this kind of thing. But what's even harder to wrap my head around is the audacity of using monsters for war. Edesa Kura was ferrying cages of monsters hidden among their supply caravans. The alliance army was aware, of course, but when they complained, Edesa Kura simply gave the unbelievable reply of "We captured them during our march."

Mister Shinsen had told me that. He came over to leak information to Dad quite frequently, though his real purpose in all this was actually to check on me.

"...Can I really do this?" I asked myself softly.

I can't tell if I'm getting used to the Stella or not. I closed my eyes in an attempt to sense it, but all I could feel was a soft warmth in my chest. *I think that's the Stella. But...*

"Big Sis!" Moné called out to me, yanking me out of my thoughts.

"What's wrong, Moné?" I asked. "Are you done harvesting the vegetables?"

"Yeah! But Big Sis, you look kind of sad. Did something bad happen?"

"Do I? I-It's nothing. I'm just thinking about stuff! There's this new alchemy recipe I've been wanting to try, but...I'm short on ingredients!"

"Really? Okay... Well, if I can help with anything, just tell me! No matter what kind of help you need, okay?"

"Okay. Thanks."

Look at this little angel. The world is a beautiful place.

"Ah!"

As Moné turned around to return to the inn, she tripped.

"Oh no! Are you okay?!" I asked her.

This is why you shouldn't run. But she's not quite as clumsy as I am. She didn't trip over her feet; she stumbled over something and fell over.

"Nng..." she winced in pain, holding onto her grazed knee.

"Oh, that must hurt. Wait a second."

I reached into my pouch to take out a low-grade tonic, but as soon as I touched the lid, I reconsidered. Right now, I had that plus my high-grade tonic with the +5 recovery effect. And a bottle of low-grade tonic would still have too much tonic in it to treat just a grazed knee.

So, at times like these...

"Light of the Holy Star, lend your ear to my prayers and lend me your glow! Photon Healing!"

...Holy magic comes in handy!

I held my hand over her knee, and a warm light enveloped it. New skin grew, and the sand on it crumbled away on its own. *Her knee looks cleaner than it would have been if we'd washed it in the lake.*

"Wow! That's so cool!" Moné cheered, the pain completely erased from her face.

"There! All better. Be careful when you head back, okay?"

"I will! Thanks, Big Sis!"

Look at this little angel. I might have healed her knee, but she healed my heart.

"Heave-ho..." she murmured, getting to her feet.

As Moné tottered off, I thought about René. *He has that horrible scar on his forehead, hidden under his bangs.* Based on what the kids had told us, René had had a stone that looked like a Spherit Stone jammed into his forehead and stitched there. The people who'd

captured the twins and their parents had probably meant to sell him to Edesa Kura as a Spherit Folk. It was the one place that hadn't outlawed slavery yet.

One could just sum it up as a terrible story, but the fact they tried to pass him off as a Spherit Folk still weighed on me. My entire clan went extinct thirteen years ago, but people still remembered their value and tried to use their legacy for foul means.

It's truly horrible.

If people like that found out I'm a Spherit Folk with the power of the Stella...

"All right!" I slapped my cheeks.

I decided to stop thinking about it for now. *I can brood over this all I want, but it won't get me anywhere. I need to try and see if I'm used to this power or not! And the only way to do that is by experimenting. So let's get down to business!*

"Daaad!" I approached Dad, who was on kitchen duty today.

"Oh! Done sweeping up the courtyard?"

"Yes. Moné said you're done harvesting the vegetables?"

"Yup, she gathered the things I asked her to. Might be about time to plant more potetos."

"Probably is. Let me help you."

I helped Dad with cooking breakfast. As always, he moved his artificial arm's fingers one by one to grip the vegetables and used a knife in his left hand to peel them. He pushed his left hand's thumb against areas he'd already peeled, shifting the vegetable to spots he hadn't gotten to yet.

Since we had two more mouths to feed now, prepping meals got harder. And one of them was a growing boy with an appetite to match. We cut potetos and oniuns and used dried meat and seasonings for soup stock, cooking them together to make what I knew in my past life as pot-au-feu.

Consommé—the type of soup stock we were making—is a pretty amazing dish. With bird or fish meat, or more traditionally, beef bouillon, you have to take out the lye from the soup stock. It takes time and effort. But with consommé, you can just eat it as is! It's simple and easy!

"It should take around thirty minutes until it's ready," Dad said.

"Then...I want to try something while we wait. Can I?"

"You want to try something...? Like...with me?" Dad pointed to his face with his left index finger, as if he wasn't sure where this was going.

I had him sit at the coffee corner and smiled at him soothingly. That only scared him though, and he looked even more on guard. *Rude.*

"Take off your prosthetic, please."

"Huh? What're you going to do?"

"Go on, just do it."

I guess he completely forgot about this? Oh well. I helped him take off his artificial arm, revealing his rounded-off elbow. It made me swallow nervously. A grim reminder of the atrocities of war was now before me. After all, his injury was...

"Um, Tina?" Dad asked awkwardly. "When you *stare* at it like that, it's...it's kind of uncomfortable..."

"...Sorry."

I closed my eyes and exhaled.

I want to heal Dad's arm. I will! Stella... Lady Akari... Lend me your strength.

I held my hands over his arms, praying.

Please. Heal Dad's arm.

"Tina, don't tell me...!" Dad realized.

Stella. Grant me the power of a miracle. Please... I focused on my prayer as light began to spill from my hands. Somewhere within the dim golden and white sparks, I could see a faint rainbow gleam. The light coalesced, forming the outline of Dad's new hand. The rainbow light enveloped his arm, flowing like an aurora, and under it, I could see flesh-colored skin.



“C-Can you...move it?” I asked him fearfully.

Dad looked overcome with emotion. He was moving his right hand for the first time in thirteen years. He bent his elbow, closed his fist, and then opened it. I could see each of his fingers was moving properly. It looked like it would function just fine as his right hand from now on.

“Tch...”

Dad placed his right hand on my head. *I’ve only ever known it as hard and wooden up till now, but now...it’s soft and warm...*

“Thank you, Tina,” he told me, all choked up.

“I *wanted* to do this, Dad,” I said, hanging my head.

With my eyes directed downward, I couldn’t see what expression Dad was making. He pressed my head down and rubbed my hair gently. *He probably doesn’t want me to see his face right now.* So I closed my eyes and just tried to feel it.

Dad’s hand. The softness of his fingers. The warmth coursing through them. I heard him snifle. His right hand tightened around me from behind and drew me in for an embrace. It caught me by surprise, but—

“Thank you,” Dad said again.

“...You’re welcome,” I replied.

I buried my face in Dad’s shoulder. He was across the table, so I just barely reached it, but I didn’t mind. *It feels warm. It’s Dad’s warmth...*

Oh, Dad... I finally—finally—repaid my debt to you, didn’t I...?



“**YOU’RE** right! Dad’s arm... It’s healed!”

I proudly told Nakona over breakfast that I had healed Dad’s arm. I’d resolved to keep the Stella a secret from Renémoné for now. They probably wouldn’t understand, and I could see Moné accidentally telling strangers. So, I just told them that advanced holy magic could heal missing limbs!

“Wow, Big Sis! You’re amazing!” Moné exclaimed.

“I can heal René’s forehead, too,” I said, reaching my hand out to him.

“I-I don’t *want* you to heal it!” René brushed off my hand with grumpy bashfulness.

"You don't need to be so shy," I said teasingly.

"I'm not being *shy*, ugly!" René snapped at me.

"Hey, w-watch your tone!" I scolded him.

Maybe it was just his age, but he just called me ugly and turned his face away. Moné sided with me and said he should just let me heal him, but René still refused to look at me. *Geez.*

"Well, I won't twist your arm." I shrugged.

"Once you start crushin' on a girl, you'll be asking her to heal you anyway," Dad chipped in to try and persuade him, unconvincingly.

We all stared at him wordlessly for a second.

"What?" he asked, confused.

"...Well, anyway, this is great, Dad!" Nakona chirped, ignoring his question.

"Yeah. It's just...you know. I haven't had a right hand for so long, I've forgotten how it feels."

"Oh. Well then, how about you go a round with me tomorrow?!" Nakona proposed, true to her combative nature. "You can teach René how to use a sword, too!"

"Him, teach *me* how to use a sword?" René scoffed, eyeing Dad suspiciously. "Like he's any *good* at it..."

"WHAT! DID! YOU! JUST! SAY?!" Dad glared at him.

René learning the sword from Dad, huh? That might be a decent idea. There are a lot of dangers in this world, so learning how to fight can't hurt. Especially for a boy. He could protect his cute little sister!

"....." René glowered back.

Yes, I thought. *This daily routine is precious to me.*

In a week, Edesa Kura and the alliance army were going to clash on the Caralus plains. I had to stop them from using monsters to corrupt the alliance army's soldiers into new monsters.

But it's fine. I can do this. King Curalius, Lady Akari, and Renge asked me to do this. I don't know if I can shoulder this responsibility. But this life is important to me. So I'll protect it, and the people I share my days with, with everything I've got.



ONE week later...

Early in the morning, while Renémoné were asleep, Renge

appeared in Rofola with three companions. I was prepared to go, both in terms of supplies and spirit.

"I'm coming along, too," Dad said.

"Huh? You're just a human! What's the point of bringing you along?"

Revireus, one of Renge's companions, was opposed to Dad coming with us. He had his long red hair tied back in a braid, sharp teeth, and an attitude problem. Another one of Renge's companions was Eure, who had orange-brown hair that reached his neck and narrow eyes. And, of course, Mister Shinsen, whom I'd met before, was the last member of his party.

I recognized all of them by now, but Revi was still a pretty scary guy. I knew a lot of Mythicals hated and looked down on humans, but his blatant discrimination was still a problem.

"Revi, I don't mind. I think it'd help keep Tina's spirits up," Renge butted in. "And you're familiar with De Marl's knights, right?" he asked Dad.

"Yeah, the Crimson Knights' leader, Rondered, is a former colleague of mine," Dad stated.

...Well, they've more history than just that, I thought. But that's probably best left unsaid...

"Are you *really* going, Tina?" Nakona asked me, visibly concerned.

"Yeah. Take care of the inn while we're gone, Nakona," I told her.

"Of course, I will! This is my home, too," she replied boastfully.

Nakona could easily keep any bandits away. Of course, all the bandits in the area knew how strong she was and didn't dare come anywhere near us. With Nakona holding down the fort, the Rofola Lodge would be fine.

"And it's your home too, Tina!" she added

"...!" That hit me deeper than I expected it to.

"So you better come back, you hear? You too, Dad!"

"...Yeah," I nodded bashfully.

I never thought a day would come when I'd march onto a battlefield, but...being sent off like this wasn't so bad. We'd already told Renémoné yesterday that Dad and I would be going to collect more potion ingredients.

Renge did say the fighting would probably end in a day, but I'm

still a little anxious. But he said we'd be back the day after tomorrow at the latest, and I hope he's right.

"Renge!" Nakona glared at him with her hands on her hips. "If Tina has even one scratch on her when she gets back, I'll bash your face in!"

"My face will be yours to bash if that happens," Renge said smoothly.

"You're just going to let her do that, Master Renge?!" Shinsen asked with shock, standing defensively in front of him.

It almost feels like Nakona's threat isn't one at all!

"It's only natural for me to be punished if I let Tina get hurt," he declared.

S-Stop that! When you say it all nonchalantly like that, it makes my face go red!

"Hmph, it's not like *humans* will ever get the jump on us," Revi snorted. "They won't touch a hair on the Saint's head!"

"What saint?" Nakona asked, stunned.

"U-Um, could you stop calling me stuff like that...?"

Don't use that title in front of Nakona! She's staring at me! Why won't they stop it?!

"Well, don't worry. You can *lie* on us! Gahahaha!" Revi told her and laughed in a way he probably meant to sound reassuring.

"You mean 'rely on us,' Master Revireus," Eure corrected him.

"Huh..." Revi paused.

"Maybe I should have you study a little more, Revi," Renge warned him.

"U-Ugh, come on, Brother, that was just..."

Wait, brother?

"Is he your brother, Renge?" I asked.

"No, we're from different tribes. But Revi is King Curalius's son. He's actually a lot more important than I am."

"He is?!" Dad and I exclaimed in unison.

Curalius's son?!

Revi went red and grumpily shouted, "What's with that reaction?!"

But of course, we'd be shocked. After all, Curalius was a white dragon...

"But he's still a youngling, so he has a bit of a childish temper," Renge said calmly right in front of Revi. "He's more bark than he is bite. Can you put up with his antics for me?"

“S-Sure...” I agreed.

“I might be a youngling compared to Master Renge, but I’m older than any of *you*! I’m over a hundred years old already! How do you like that?! Huh?” Revi boasted.

“If I may, Master Revireus, that *exact* attitude is why he called you childish,” Eure scolded him.

“Ugh...”

A hundred years old, huh? He really is older than us, then. But somehow, it feels like he’s the same mental age as me, if not younger...

“Oh, speaking of, I haven’t greeted you yet, Holy Woman. I am Eure, a griffin. I currently serve as Master Revireus’s attendant and educator. Should Master Revireus do anything inappropriate, don’t hesitate to turn to me. I’ll be sure to tattle to Master Renge.”

“Eure’s fairly knowledgeable, though he’s not quite as familiar with human mannerisms,” Renge explained, gesturing to his group of friends. “But he can have quite the temper himself, so if Eure and Revi do anything out of line, tell Shinsen and me.”



“.....”

...At this point, wouldn't it be faster if I just talk directly to Renge? And what's the point of letting someone so quick to anger look after the childish one?

“A-Are they gonna be all right...?” Dad asked anxiously.

“So long as it doesn't turn into a battle,” Renge said soothingly.

So if it does, it won't be all right... I mean, we're going to a battlefield!!

“Anyway, let's get going,” Renge said. “Let's stop by Deshmel first. Tina's going to stay there for a while, after all...”

“Yeah, I remember,” I responded.

“We're done cleaning the place up, so I just want you to get familiar with it. Decide which room you'll be taking. Things like that.”

“Does it look like the battle's gonna start soon?” Dad asked.

“The alliance army's lagging behind a little. They probably ran into monsters. Edesa Kura just captured any in their way. They've more cages with them compared to the last time we checked.”

“.....”

Dad's expression hardened. *Capturing any monsters they met...?*

“Say, Renge, isn't our objective to purify the monsters? Maybe I should sneak into Edesa Kura's army and start purifying them?” I asked, imagining myself sneaking around like some kind of spy kid in a movie.

“They'll come to us. You don't have to do anything.”

“Really?”

Renge shot me down...which made me oddly sad. *I kind of wanted to skulk around like a spy...*

Oh, well. It's not like my meager endurance would ever let me do that.

“We can discuss this at Fort Deshmel.” Renge shrugged at my questioning look. “That'll be our base for the time being, anyway.”

“All right,” I complied, giving up on my dreams of being a spy in my second life.

“You can rest assured, Holy Woman,” Mister Shinsen said. “We won't let any harm come to you.”

“U-Um...Mister Shinsen, could you *please* stop calling—”

“Oh, the sun's about to rise. Let's get moving,” Renge said,

cutting me off.

Hey! *I was about to tell him to stop calling me names!*

"Let's fly, Tina," Renge said, extending a hand to me.

"O-Okay," I replied, placing my hand in his.

His hand feels large and warm. And unlike Dad's, it doesn't feel too rough. The skin's still harder than mine, and his fingers are long...

And so we warped—using teleportation magic.

I gasped.

His hand gripped mine, pulling me along. I could feel his intense gaze on me, which only made my pulse quicken. It'd only been two weeks since we last saw each other, and nothing had really changed since. But...

"I hope Renge's doing well."

"Tell Renge I said hello...!"

...when Lady Akari's smile surfaced in my mind, I felt something prickle at my heart. *What is this?* Renge and Lady Akari knew each other. Given Renge's age, that shouldn't come as a surprise. But just what was their relationship? Would he answer if I asked?

And...honestly, some part of me didn't want to know.

I mean, why should I know about it? Was this any of my business? No, it wasn't. I recalled Renge's pained expression when he looked like he was on the verge of tears. Did she use to comfort him when he made that face?

"Tina," Renge's voice pulled me out of my gloomy thoughts.

"Ah!" I exclaimed.

"Are you okay? Are you dizzy?"

"Um..."

I looked around. We were in what looked like some kind of plaza. Behind us was a tall, bluish wall. Probably the same sort of stone used for De Marl's first wall. About a hundred feet away was another wall, made from the same blue stone.

It almost seemed like a theme park castle, but it was actually a real fortress. The road leading up to the castle was just a vast plot of land. You could easily plow some fields here. But, for some reason, no one had.

A river circled the fortress, and the tall castle was built out of towering stone walls. But for some reason, the top of the castle looked like it was blown off and crumbling in on itself.

"Oh, that's what Revi broke," Renge explained, noticing my

gaze.

"I hate to see what happens when it rains," I remarked.

They said Revi was the one who took over Fort Deshmel, so he probably broke it in the process. And...he really made a mess of things. It kind of gave me this mental image of a giant red dragon landing on top of a castle, breathing fire, while all the soldiers ran away...

"The former slaves are working with us to fix this place up," Renge said.

"Wait, what slaves?" I asked.

"The people who were enslaved here when we arrived. I told them to go wherever they wished, but...they said they'd nowhere to go. Not that I blame them, with zombies and monsters prowling about and Edesa Kura's army out in the Caralus plains. The only place they *could* go is Saikorea, and they're hardline isolationists. I've heard the only reason they agreed to join the war against Edesa Kura was because they wanted to use the battle as a chance to test their experiments."

"....."

Saikorea was a land of scholars. They accepted those who wanted to study with open arms, but those who didn't weren't even allowed to enter the country. I'd heard travelers mention they made it a point not to provide humanitarian aid, either...

"So...this is what Fort Deshmel looks like from the outside..." I heard Dad say pensively. "I never thought I'd come here like this."

"Dad?"

I turned around, finding the other three standing there with Dad. I then returned my gaze to the misty castle and its blown-off peak, wondering how we'd get in. *There aren't any ladders or doors around. Are we supposed to scale the stone walls to go inside?*

"Renge, how are we supposed to get in?" I asked.

"Oh, there's an entrance in one of the walls. It's a pretty interesting structure."

"What?!" I cried enthusiastically.

Like a hidden passageway? This really is like a theme park castle!

"Let's go in," Renge urged us. "We can settle down and talk things out inside."

"Should we *really* be relaxing?" Dad asked. "They're about to clash on the Caralus plains any minute now, right?"

"There's something I want to check first," Renge replied.

“Like what...?”

Renge set off and we followed him.

What does he want to check? If I can use the Stella properly?

“You’ll see. But yes, they are. And that’s why I’ll intervene.”

“Y-You’re going to fight personally, Master Renge?!” Eure gawked at him.

“In a *human* war?!” Revi looked shocked.

Dad and I didn’t understand what was so surprising about that. What was so weird about Renge intervening in a human war?

“I want to make a statement against that country.”

A silence hung between them. The atmosphere felt tense. Renge was walking ahead of us, and I couldn’t see his expression. But a dragon like Revi and a griffin like Eure—two powerful Mythical Beasts—stood stock-still in stunned silence.

Renge choosing to intervene must really be unusual. I’d like to know why, but I know better than to ask right now.

“What are you trying to achieve by intervening in human matters?” Dad asked.

“I won’t lay a hand on the alliance army, don’t worry,” Renge replied. “The only ones I’ll put to the flame are those who threaten this world.”

“Hm...” Dad groaned.

“Tina, you just have to wait on Revi’s back. I’ll gather all the monsters in one place,” Renge explained. “If you’ve gotten used to the Stella, just being near them should start purifying them. For today, I want you to gauge just what your effective range is.”

“Just l-like that?!” I stammered, aghast. “In the middle of a battle?!”

“It’s important. If your purification’s range is too short, you’ll need to get closer to them, and we’ll have to consider setting up thinner, shorter walls...”

I guess it really is necessary when he puts it like that. But having to hide behind thin walls sounds unsafe...

“The fort’s walls are about twenty feet thick. So, if your range with the Stella is less than seven feet, and we want you to purify them from indoors, we’ll need to make the walls thinner so it can extend to the monsters outside. But that’s dangerous.”

“Y-Yeah,” Dad added. “The monsters are larger and more belligerent than ever. Your plan was to set up a monster drawing barrier around this fort and draw them in from across the continent,

right?”

“Correct. We’ll have to be especially careful at first. Some will swoop in from the sky.”

Like the bird monster we saw on the Mythical continent... Depending on how wide the Stella’s range is, it might be necessary to make the walls thinner. And I’d really rather not make the walls less effective at keeping things out of where I’d be sleeping...

“I think your range will get bigger once you get used to it... But I doubt it’ll be any larger than 30 feet. Lady Akari’s range was about that,” Renge said.

“.....”

“Hmmmmmm,” I said loudly, letting the annoyance enter my voice.

“What? What’s wrong?” Renge asked me.

“Nothing...”

That pisses me off a little. So, what? I can’t do better than his Lady Akari?

Our path took us in front of the castle. The walls looked about two stories tall, and around us was a moat. I couldn’t tell how deep it was, since it was full of water, which seemed to have a current. It was probably drawing it in from the nearby aqueduct.

Shinsen stepped forward and thrust his hand over the moat’s edge. He pulled a long rod with a hook at its tip out of the water, then threw it at a part of the stone wall.

The hook latched onto a small hole, which opened up easily as Shinsen applied a bit of force. What I’d thought was part of the stone wall was actually a metal plate camouflaged as brickwork. Upon being pulled down, it served as a bridge the same length as the moat. It seemed so flimsy, I had to wonder if it was even durable enough to support all our weight...

“Let’s go, then,” Renge said.

“O-Okay.” I nodded.

Renge sauntered across casually. Dad followed him, stepping down on the metal plate.

“It’s more durable than it looks. You’ll be fine, Tina,” Dad said, reaching his hand out to me.

“Thanks.”

I took his hand and let him pull me along—it was his right hand. Feeling that warmth naturally made me smile. The other day, he’d come back from his match with Nakona, happily admitting

he'd lost. He'd then put René through the wringer to work out his bitterness over that. He was clearly both proud of Nakona for beating him and frustrated with himself for losing.

He'd grumbled his knight senses were still rusty, but he'd handled his sword much better with his dominant hand. Even an amateur could tell the difference. Dad was, when all was said and done, a knight at heart.

After a few moments of walking, I was gasping for air.

"You all right?" Dad asked, looking at me concerned.

"I-I'm fine...!"

"Really?"

Well, I say that...but why is this corridor so freakishly long?! It reminds me of the time I had to walk up a mountain to visit a temple in Japan...!

The landing in the middle of the staircase had doors on both sides, which they completely ignored! Renge and Dad...or rather, everyone here other than me, was climbing this endless staircase like it was nothing. But really, isn't a staircase that lasts more than five minutes like, really bad?

The walls were only two stories tall, I'm sure of that. But it shouldn't take five minutes to climb up two stories! Or even five or six stories, for that matter! *Is this really just a problem with my endurance?!*

"This is a pretty long staircase..." Dad mumbled. "How far does it go?"

"The second floor of the fort...?" Renge replied, puzzled.

...Are you sure it's not like the fourth or fifth floor? Like really? It feels longer than that... I feel like we went through three landings already...

"Would you like me to carry you, Holy Woman?" Eure offered with a smile.

"Huh? N-No, thank you..." I refused, wheezing.

Man, I really ought to tell him to stop calling me that... Grr...

"....."

My stomach let out a pitiful grumble. This made me forget about my exhaustion and simply blush. We'd usually be eating breakfast right about now...

"First thing we'll do when we get to the top is get something to eat," Renge said.

"Yeah, we can't fight on an empty stomach," Dad added.

“Not that we’re *going* to fight,” Renge insisted.

“Who knows what may happen, though?” Dad threw back at him.

“I can’t imagine someone stronger than us showing up,” Renge said with a shrug.

“Th-That’s very confident of you,” Dad said.

“Well, ’course we are! We’re Mythical Beasts! The strongest, proudest creatures in this world! Gahahaha!” Revi laughed, proudly planting his hands on his hips as he did.

Mythical Beasts, huh? The strongest, most long-lived creatures in this world. Renge’s been alive for over three thousand years, despite looking so young.

“And if Master Renge’s goin’ there, it won’t be worth calling it a battle! He’s the strongest Mythical Beast in the world!”

“Why are you boasting about that, Revi?” Renge asked him coolly. “I don’t need your compliments.”

“B-Brother!” Revi said in an oddly sycophantic voice.

“Stop that,” Renge cut him off sharply.

Revi made another groveling remark, but Renge simply walked down a few steps and approached me.

“I’ll make you float,” he said.

“Huh?”

He wrapped his arms around my waist, and I felt my feet leave the ground.

“Eep!” I cried.

“Let’s keep going,” he said, returning to the front of the group.

“Huh? Ah, wait!”

It’s like my weight’s all gone... I was now floating about ten inches above the stairs. After Renge let go of my waist, he grabbed my right hand. Even though it’s not too high, I don’t like this floaty feeling. But, it’s...well, it’s easier to handle the stairs this way.

“I’m like a balloon...”

“Baa-loon?” Renge repeated, confused.

“Never mind...” I said hurriedly.

I floated up, flying at low altitude before we eventually reached a reception hall that looked like our objective, and Renge’s magic wore off. I wasn’t as tired, thanks to floating some of the way there, but...

I then realized this wasn’t *actually* a reception hall...

“Wh-What is this place?!”

"It's like a dance hall!" Dad exclaimed.

Dad was right; there were marble pillars all over the place, and it looked like a dance hall. The floor was decked out in red carpet and had an orchestra stage. A fancy chandelier dangled from the tall ceiling. It was like a fairytale castle. Or a set from a fantasy movie.

I looked at it, stunned. I mean, it was a palace inside a fortress! Why did they even *call* this place a fort?

"Fort Deshmel was built by Edesa Kura's king two generations ago, who dabbled in architecture," Renge explained. "At the time, they built their fortifications to be both durable and extravagant. The king after him, who was more focused on war, made effective use of those structures, and it made the country that much more powerful."

"So...this fort has that much history behind it...?" Dad asked.

"I'd say so, yes. It's almost two hundred years old.

"It gives me chills when you say that. A building *this* large, standing for two hundred years..." Dad looked around the dance hall.

It was so spacious, it looked more than a mile wide. *Well, maybe I'm exaggerating. But I'm sure it's at least ten square yards.*

"The rooms on the various staircase landings all lead to corridors that wind like mazes," Renge said, explaining the fort's rough layout. "Each floor has a different structure, and most of its rooms are guardrooms for the soldiers. Above here are the guest rooms, reception rooms, and offices. And above that is the room used by the high-ranking officers. The section Revi destroyed was the audience chamber and the residences for members of the royal family."

"Ugh..." Revi groaned at being reminded of his blunder.

Right, the very top of the castle is wrecked. I guess not having an audience chamber or a royal bedroom doesn't really make this place any less livable, but...I'd prefer it if the roof didn't leak when it rains. That part needs to be fixed, at least.

"But for now, let's get something to eat. There's a large dining room at the top of this floor."

"And where's the kitchen?" I asked.

"Across from the dining hall. Each floor has its own bath, and all the rooms on the top floors have attached bathrooms. Oh, and there are dining halls on each of the upper floors, too... The one on

the top floor is ruined, though.”

“Uuuugh...” Revi groaned again.

“C-Cut him some slack...” I said emphatically.

Renge’s taking a lot of potshots at Revi. It makes me feel kinda bad for him.

“I can make us something to eat if there are ingredients,” Dad suggested.

“Yes, I figured you might say that, so I had Shinsen get us some.”

“Not to worry, Holy Woman!” Shinsen said proudly. “I’ve prepared a cornucopia of foods that I believe you’ll enjoy!”

“Thank you,” I said awkwardly.

This does mean climbing more stairs, though... But if it’s just one more floor, I can make it! The end’s in sight!

“Oh, speaking of... Ummm, everyone, listen...” I said as I turned around, intending to ask them to stop calling me “Holy Woman” and “Saint”.

“Tina, watch out!” Renge brought his face close to mine.

“H-Huh?”

“Are you all right?! I told you not to strain yourself!” he said nervously.

“Are you OK, Tina?” Dad looked at me.

“What...?”

I’m honestly not sure what’s going on. Oh, but...my legs are shaking.

“...I’m sorry.”

Oh. I almost fell and Renge caught me. Wow, my legs are shaking so hard I didn’t even notice I was about to trip. That’s an embarrassing level of clumsiness...!

Anyway, Dad decided he’d make us something to eat while I sat down in the dining hall to rest. *Won’t Dad get lost in such a big kitchen, though? I’m kind of worried about that...* I decided to think about that instead of my embarrassing slip-up.

“Do you want me to cast some healing magic on you?” Renge asked, concerned.

“Ah, no, I’ll be fine... Oh, right! I think I had a stamina restorative...! Oh, but I forgot to bring it...”

“Just give it up and rest for now.”

“I will. Thanks.”

I had low and high-grade tonics in my pouch, along with some

blood-increasing potions and high-grade status ailment medicine. Eure served us tea, and I thanked him as I accepted my cup.

"By the way...what should I do once I'm out on the plains?" I asked.

"I'll gather up the monsters and teleport them a short distance away from you," Renge replied. "I'll leave Revi and Eure to watch over you. So, for now, just focus on figuring out the Stella's range."

"Th-That's all?"

"Yes."

It really does feel different from what I expected...

"Okay, food's ready." Dad walked in with sandwiches.

"Thanks, Dad."

He had made simple sandwiches consisting of vegetables, ham, and butter. Simple but good! *Ah! Actually, didn't sandwiches in my old world use a sauce based on mayonnaise? I could make mayonnaise and use it in sauces for the sandwiches at our inn! It'll make our lunches that much more popular!*

I don't think the idea of sandwich sauce exists here yet. So maybe we can get adventurers to have sandwiches as a form of takeout...

"Are you sure you don't need any?" Dad asked Renge while I was busy thinking up a new lunch menu.

"Positive. We usually make do with drinking the water from the Levinos Spring."

"Wait, Mythical Beasts can subsist on water?!"

Then why do you eat so many sweets?!

"Well, yes, but the Levinos Spring's water is full of Air. So strictly speaking, we ingest the Air in it."

"That's good enough for us," Revi added, scowling at Dad. "Unlike *your* inferior species, we don't need to devour other living things to survive."

"Revi..." Renge glared at Revi, exasperated.

I'd heard of elves looking down on humans, but many races among the Mythicals didn't think favorably of mankind, either. I guess it made sense a dragon would act this haughty. They do have that special, prideful feel to them.

Revi looked away awkwardly, but I didn't take offense. And Dad probably didn't, either.

"Do you want to check the rooms once you're done eating?" Renge asked.

"Yeah. But...should I really be taking it easy like this?" I

replied with a hint of concern.

“Well, we’ve got our eyes on the situation, so it’s fine.”

“You *do*?”

But how? Renge answered my question by pointing at his forehead. Under his bangs was another eye, surrounded by a strange pattern.

Dad and I flinched. *He has a third eye on his forehead!*

“It’s an eye of farsight. Shinsen has it, too. And Eure can use similar magic. Once they’re close to clashing, we can teleport there. Honestly, I don’t mind if you want to stay or come, Tina.”

“I hear you’ve strong bonds with De Marl, Father of the Holy Woman,” Shinsen said to Dad. “Depending on what Edesa Kura does, Master Renge might not be opposed to cooperating with the other human countries.”

“We want you to serve as our intermediary,” Eure summarized.

“What?!” Revi stared at them like he had been left completely out of the loop.

Oh, wow... The way they treat Revi is pretty bad...

“Cooperate with them... You mean against the Sugula?” Dad asked.

“Including the Sugula, yes. If Edesa Kura is doing what we think they’re doing, the situation will escalate into something the humans can’t handle on their own. I recommend you ask for help from the current Elf of the Sun. Oh, do you know who the Elf of the Sun is?”

“You mean Shida?” I asked.

“Hm?”

“Eh?”

“Oh?”

“What?”

The four Mythical Beasts stared at me, surprised.

“...What?” I muttered, wondering if I said something strange.

I mean, Shida’s the Elf of the Sun, right? He said so multiple times...

“Tina, you *know* this generation’s Elf of the Sun?” Renge asked me.

“Uh, yes? Shida taught me how to use magic...”

“T-Truthy?!” Shinsen said in admiration. “That’s impressive, Holy Woman!”

“Color me surprised,” Eure remarked. “Not only do you know

the Elf of the Sun, you're even his student!"

"H-Huh?!" Revi simply sat there, mouth agape.

I did think the legend of the Elf of the Sun was really impressive when Renge told me about it a while ago but does everyone really have to act so shocked? I mean, yeah, Shida's an elf. But he's kind of also a perverted old man in a kid's body...

"The Elf of the Sun is the title given to the one chosen by the Elven Empire of Forestria's sacred treasure, the Grimoire of King Leishi," Shinsen explained for Dad's benefit. "And you're a student of the one capable of opening that grimoire?! That's simply wonderful, Holy Woman!"

"S-So? What kind of curse does the Elf of the Sun bear?" Renge asked me nervously.

"Wh-What curse?!" I exclaimed.

Why is this conversation going so dark all of a sudden?! I don't know about Shida bearing any curses!

"Leishi's grimoire had a curse called the King's Privilege. In exchange for being able to use all the elements—earth, water, fire, wind, metal, wood, lightning, ice, darkness, holy, time, and void—it placed a curse on the wielder. So as to not misuse that great power, if anyone qualified to open the grimoire except for Leishi does so, it will place a curse that inflicts some kind of 'strain' on them."

"R-Really? Shida didn't say anything about a curse..." I said.

"I see... Well, I suppose he wouldn't just share his weaknesses. But really, you know the current Elf of the Sun, Tina? That's wonderful," Renge said. "Hm...well, the curse aside, what kind of person is he? Do you think he'd be willing to cooperate with us?"

"Hm..."

How do I answer this question? I can imagine him making groping gestures with that unpleasant sneer of his and shouting, "Gahaha! You're asking me for help?! Let me fondle that growing bosom of yours, and I'll do whatever you say! One favor per ten gropes! Ahahaha!"



Ugh...

I settled with telling them, "I think so?"

"Really? In that case..."

"Buttttt...he'll probably demand to grope someone's butt or chest," I appended.

"...See, this is why I hate elves," someone whispered.



AND so, due to the makeup of Edesa Kura's army, the Mythical Beasts chose to ally with De Marl and the alliance army. Dad was hesitant to leave me behind in the fort, even if Eure and Revi would be with me. Then again, he wasn't sure if he wanted me to come to the battlefield, either.

Renge probably felt it'd be all the same no matter where I was. He'd just teleport the monsters to me, so I could be anywhere... It really gave me an "anything goes" sort of feeling. But personally, I was worried about Lico. So I wanted to go to the battlefield with Dad and the others.

When I told Renge I wanted to come along, he simply said "Okay," like he was expecting me to say that.

"I wish I'd known we were heading there ahead of time..." Dad said nervously.

Dad needed to prepare himself emotionally prior to meeting Lico again. He kept scratching his head and pouting. But Lico was in her thirties, so I really wished Dad would get his act together and make a move on her!

"What? Do you mean you wanted time to prepare in advance?" Renge asked him.

"Huh? Well, uh, it's just that, hm, you know..." Dad stammered. "Politics means you have to stand on ceremony. It can be exhausting."

"True. Humans can be exhausting like that. They think too much."

"Ugh," Dad groaned, unable to deny it.

Renge's pretty bad at understanding human politics too, I guess. Not that I understand it that well, either.

"Oh, this room..."

I was being led down the staircase and shown around the

second floor's barracks. All the rooms were simple rooms meant to house multiple people, with beds for four to six soldiers. There were no windows or private rooms, which made the place look really stressful.

But as we went through the maze-like corridors, we reached the corner room at the very end of the hall. The commander's personal room. It was well furnished. It had a desk, cupboards, shelves, a bookshelf, and a bed.

We could remove the ugly black carpet, but the paintings on the walls... What are we gonna do about them? They're pretty big. Well, I guess they don't get in the way. They're just scenery paintings.

It wasn't far from the kitchen and the dining hall, and when I opened a door on the right side, I found an attached bath and toilet! *This looks like the right room. The bathtub even has a Heat Rock...*

"I think I want this room," I told Renge.

"There are better rooms on the top floors, though."

"But I don't want to climb up that many stairs..."

"Oh..." Renge nodded at my explanation.

And so, I decided on this as my temporary bedroom! *Time to pick a room for Dad next!*

"Ah, wait. They made a move," Renge told me suddenly.

"You mean...the armies did?!"

"That's right. They're about to start fighting. Tina, you and the others stay out of sight. I'll intervene first."

"O-Okay."

I didn't forget about the war, but the fortress grand tour was a good distraction. And now it's over...

Renge offered me his hand. I took it and prepared for the battle to come.

"...Let's go."

I can't let Lico and the others become monsters, and I won't let Edesa Kura get away with their evil plans. I'll be fine! Renge says he'll protect me...so I've got nothing to fear.

My fingers closed around his hand, and my eyes were flooded with light for a moment. When I opened them again, I found myself standing in a vast plain. We were standing behind a large rock formation a good distance away from where the armies were facing off against each other.

To the right was an army of soldiers, all of them in different colored uniforms. *This must be the alliance army.* Opposite of them,

to the left, was an army clad in black and standing perfectly still. *I can tell that's Edesa Kura's army.*

I could see large boxes that looked like cages here and there among their ranks. They were covered with large cloths, but the audible snarling and howling coming from them made it all too clear what was inside.

Just thinking about how scared the alliance army's knights must be makes my heart ache. Regardless of if Edesa Kura's mechanical soldiers shoot the monsters dead or let them loose on the alliance army, it will still end in the human soldiers either dying or turning into monsters themselves. Honestly, at this rate, the alliance army has no chance of winning this!

"....."

I can't forgive them. Edesa Kura's generals are behind the frontlines, overlooking the battle from safety while our people are in so much danger. It's terrible.

"Hm? Where's Renge?" Dad asked, looking around.

"Huh?"

I looked around, too. I thought Renge was right next to me, but Dad's question made me realize he wasn't behind the rock formation. Only Revi, Eure, and Shinsen were there.

"Master Renge decided to directly intervene in the battle, so we'll be staying here to guard you, Holy Woman," Eure said, bowing his head.

"Gahaha! This'll be fun!" Revi laughed loudly.

"You think this'll be *fun*?!" I cried.

Shinsen just smiled.

I'm surprised they can call this situation fun...

"Rest assured, Holy Woman," Shinsen told me. "The human army may seem at a disadvantage for now, but... Yes, if Master Renge intervenes, this won't count as a battle! He'll prove himself unrivaled."

"R-Really...?"

He says it so confidently...

"Make it so we can all see Master Renge's bravery, Eure! Use that thing? You know...that thing!"

"You mean my farsight magic? At least learn what it's called, Master Revireus..."

Another spell I don't know... The Mythicals seem to know a lot of spells demi-humans and humans don't. Eure moved his finger through

the air, drawing glowing letters. The letters turned to particles of light that formed a mirrored surface. The large, magic mirror was set against the rocks, showing us a valley gorge where two figures we couldn't make out glared at each other.

Wow...this is amazing! And suspenseful, too... It makes me nervous just watching them. Two knights on horseback rode through the middle of the scene. One of them was in red armor and the other black. Black armor and a skull helmet... That was Lico! Meaning the man in the red armor must be...

"Rondered," Dad whispered.

It really is him... Isn't he the commander of the alliance army? Why is their commander on the front lines?

"Edesa Kura's commander! Reveal yourself and give us your name! I am Captain of De Marl's Crimson Knights, Rondered Grephis!"

"And I am Captain of De Marl's Ebony Knights, Licorice Avide! What, are all your country's commanders cowards who won't show their face?!"

Should they really do this before a battle? If someone aims an arrow or an air gun at them, they'll be easy targets...

"Keheheh... That's quite the statement to make, you infidels."

A man on horseback, clad in light clothes, answered their provocation. He had a nasty smile, and he almost looked like he was clad in casualwear...and certainly not in armor, like you'd expect. The contrast between him and Lico was kind of absurd.

"So *you're* Edesa Kura's commander?" Lico glared at him. "What are you thinking? Using monsters in a war! You'll be exposing your own country to their threat!"

"Give us your name!" Rondered demanded. "Unless you'd prefer to die a nameless death like the lowliest of soldiers!"

"You want my little old name? Keheheh. I, you silly little infidels, am Mephisto Gudil," he replied pompously.

"Wh...?!" Lico looked shocked.

"What did you just say?!" Rondered exclaimed.

"He can't be...?!" Dad sounded just as surprised.

Does Dad know this Mephisto Gudil character? I think I remember him having some scary title attached to him...

"D-Do you take us for fools?" Lico went on, clearly confused. "We've locked blades with Mephisto Gudil plenty of times. We might be enemy generals, but what are you trying to pull, assuming

someone else's na—"

Rondered didn't seem willing to take this lightly dressed man's words at face value, either. I looked up at Dad, who was furrowing his brows. His expression looked mixed. *It's only natural people would find out someone's lying immediately if they're assuming the identity of a well-known person. Why even try to pull this kind of trick?*

"Keheheh..." he laughed, as if that was his answer. "I simply exchanged it. The old one was too old to be of use."

"Wh-What?" Rondered narrowed his eyes.

"You exchanged *what*...?" Lico asked in disbelief.

"Why, my body. There simply aren't enough vessels to go around," the Edesa Kura general said. "That's why I want your bodies. You'll be dying either way. So you may as well die whole and pretty."

"What in the *world* are you saying...?!" Rondered snapped at him.

"Ronde, something's wrong!" Lico cried. "Have the archers and gunners prepare to attack! Defenders, step forward!"

"Keheheh! Too late, infidels! You'll *all* be my vessels! Now, unleash it, my alter-egos! Gain your own vessels!"

The man raised his hands and started chanting a spell without so much as blinking. *Magic?! But we're on the human continent; there aren't enough Spherits here!* But even as I thought that, I could see the magic circle above him growing larger and larger. *How does this make sense...?!* The circle expanded, covering both armies.

"Impossible!" I cried. "How is he casting magic that's this big?! This is the human continent!"

"Wh-What's that man doing?!" Dad raised his voice. "H-Hey, at this rate, the alliance army's going to—"

"*Hmph*, don't panic," Revi smirked. "Magic of that scale is nothing to Master Renge..."

The next moment, a deafening sound—loud enough to even reach us, as far as we were from the battlefield—shook the two armies. A thundering sound, like a rock shattering a pane of glass. It made me instinctively cover my ears. I then heard a tinkling sound and opened my eyes to see the magic circle fall apart and disappear.

The magic circle was...broken...?

"Void magic...?" I muttered.

"I-Is that what it is?" Dad asked

"Y-Yes. Spells with the power to nullify other spells have the

void attribute.”

Users of void magic are said to be even harder to come by than holy magic users. Even elves need to devote their entire lives for a chance to wield it. In my past life’s terms, it’s as rare as seeing Bigfoot or a UFO. *I never thought I’d see it for myself!*

Wait, no, that’s not even the problem here...!

“...My, my...” Mephisto said.

Lico and Rondered had been heading back to their armies, but when they heard that sound, they turned their horses back around. The smile on the so-called Mephisto Gudil’s lips deepened. I didn’t think his smile could be any more unpleasant than it already was. But Renge now stood in front of him in his beast form. *And not only that... he’s huge!*

His four legs floated in midair, and his three tails whipped aggressively as he looked down on the fake Mephisto. The pomp and circumstance of how he looked made Revi pump his fist next to me. *He really does admire and love Renge, doesn’t he?*

“So you’re still alive, Renge...” the fake Mephisto whispered hatefully, looking up at him with narrowed eyes.

That made it sound like he personally knew Renge...

“Is that a Mythical?!” Lico asked.

“Wait, that Mythical, isn’t that...?” a knight in blue armor approached them on horseback.

That’s Captain Gildias!

“You know him, Gildias?!” Lico asked him.

“Yes! When Sir Marcus left the knights, we met this Mythical on the road... But it wasn’t this big...”

The three captains looked up at the Mythical Beast floating in front of them. The black Mythical, Renge, landed on the ground with a dark fog brewing around him.

Is he going to reveal his identity here...?!

“Y-You’re...!” Lico raised her voice in surprise upon seeing his human form.

She’d met Renge in the Lost Regalia ruins, after all. But Renge didn’t turn around to face Lico and the alliance army. He remained expressionless, his gaze fixed on the fake Mephisto Gudil.

“I recognize that scent,” Renge said. “I’ll admit I’m surprised. I was confident I’d reduced you to ashes and then burned that ash out of existence.”

“Keheheheh. Well, I made *suuuure* to leave the recipe for

making me again behind before you burned me down,” the fake Mephisto gloated. “And thanks to that, see?! I’m back to life and fit as a fiddle! Keheheheh!”

“Uh-huh,” Renge sighed. “Looking at you now...you’re such an empty, lifeless mass. To think I’d feel so much anger and hatred toward something like you... I guess Air was right. I really *am* immature.”

“...Huh? What did you just say?” Fake Mephisto sounded offended.

“I was talking about you, you mass of emptiness. Isn’t it about time you drop the act and show yourself for what you really are? I’m pretty confident I know what you look like already.”

“I won’t do that! After all, we won this time. The Sugula has been reborn; there’s absolutely nothing you can do! Keheheheheh!”

I’m not following their conversation...

“Does Renge...know this guy?” Dad asked.

“Not exactly this exact person, but I think he’s carrying its memories,” Eure answered.

“It was a monster that could split into multiple copies and threatened to consume the world, after all,” Shinsen explained.

“Ah...!” My eyes widened in realization. “Are you saying that’s *the*...?!” I trailed off and shuddered.

If that’s what Renge is talking to, then... That’s not a person, it’s...

“And look!” Fake Mephisto continued to gloat. “Look at my mechanized soldiers. My automatons! Look at the size of this army! Two hundred thousand! Keheheh! They’re made of special alloy, and all have magic circles to counter spells, so you can’t burn them! Ha ha ha! You can’t do anything! Just sit by while the humans become my new vessels or get eaten by the monsters! Kihihihihihhi!”

Two hundred thousand?! He has that many soldiers?! I don’t think the alliance army is small by any means, but they can’t beat monsters.

Lico and the other captains glared at the fake Mephisto Gudil.

“But first, I’ll tear you to bits! My two hundred thousand soldiers and automatons! Tear him! Rip him! Turn him into a snack for the monsters! Go on, move! Avenge my—”

“Are you done talking?” Renge asked with a yawn. “May I, then? Tell something to your main body.”

“...Tell it what?”

“Tell it that next time, I’ll completely erase your existence—core and all.”

“...!”

Renge spoke resolutely. He then raised his right index finger slightly upward. A magic circle shone, and the whole mechanical army shook and floated up into the air. Mephisto Gudil was sucked toward the circle too. I didn't even hear Renge chant a spell.

Mephisto let out a pitiful screech as his body was pulled off the ground. He and his soldiers were all drawn to the circle. Like iron sand clinging to a magnet, they all lumped up in one spot.

KATHUNK...!

We all turned around, hearing the sound of something landing behind us. The monster cages had all teleported to a spot a few feet away from us, all stacked together. *He teleported the monster cages here in the middle of all that?! He can do that?!*

We turned to face the mirror again.

“Impossible...” Dad whispered.

That one word seemed to describe the alliance army's feelings as a whole. Mephisto Gudil and his army of two hundred thousand automatons—the army he'd been so confident about—all floated helplessly in the air, pressed together in a single clump, casting a massive shadow over the plains that covered the whole alliance army.

“Burn.”

Black flames covered Renge's arm, and, as if in sync, flames began consuming Edesa Kura's army. In the blink of an eye, the black conflagration overtook the entire army. But it didn't stop there.

For in the next moment...

Crunch! Crunch! Crunch!

I heard three sounds.

The clump of mechanical soldiers shrank three times, and after the final sound, there was nothing left. There was no fire, no soldiers...nothing.

“Yesss!!! That's my big brother!” Revi cheered.

“Master Renge's as impressive as ever!” Eure and Shinsen said as one.

No, that really is...very impressive. It's not just on a whole other level, it's on another order of magnitude altogether. He's not just strong, he's...transcendent, somehow.

“See?! That was no battle for him!” Revi trumpeted with a satisfied smile.

“Ah, umm yeah...”

“That’s the Mythical Beast that stands above us all!” Revi said proudly. “Renge’s true power, drawing on the blood of the Beast King Cerberus! The strongest in all of Wisty Air! He’s trained under the creator God Air! And not just that! He was born to the son of the son of Air’s brother! So of *course* he’d be that strong! Ahahaha!”

“Wait...what’s that about Air’s brother’s son...?”

I’ve gotten used to Revi bragging about Renge, but I feel like he just said something I can’t ignore.

But just then, Renge teleported next to us.

“Don’t I always tell you not to tell people things they don’t need to know, Revi...?”

“Nngh!”



Renge dropped an iron claw on Revi's face, shutting him up. *Sh-Should I have not listened to that?!* I decided to stay silent, so Dad and I could live to see another day...

"Marcus," Renge said.

"H-Huh? Yeah?!" Dad responded, his voice cracking.

"My apologies, but could you go with Shinsen and explain to the alliance army what the Sugula is? It's like I suspected. The Dwarf inside the Bottle took over Edesa Kura."

"It did?!"

The Dwarf inside the Bottle...the Kaguya with a will of its own. But how? Didn't Renge burn it down?

"Edesa Kura probably created a new Dwarf inside the Bottle... But I didn't expect it'd retain its memories from two thousand years ago. Between that and the Sugula, we'll need the Elf of the Sun's cooperation... In fact, we'll want all the demi-humans allied with us. The Dwarf inside the Bottle takes advantage of the fact others don't know about it. It nearly blotted out a continent because of that two thousand years ago."

"R-Right..." Dad muttered. "Yeah, letting that big thing swallow up the planet would put all life in danger... Understood, I'll do what I can. Shinsen, could you help me?"

"Very well."

"Tina, you focus on confirming your purification range," Renge turned to me. "Even if you're getting used to the Stella, I don't think your range will be too large at first. Get closer to the monsters but hide behind Eure, understood?"

"Y-Yeah. I will, but..."

Renge stood behind Revi, wrapping his right arm around his neck and placing a hand over his forehead, forcing his neck back, so he had to look up. *He's constricting him in place, so he can't say a word.* Dad left with Shinsen, looking grateful to be away from here, and teleported away. Eure stood in front of me.

"Let's go, Holy Woman!" he said, with one hand on his hip and the other pointing forward.

The hierarchy in this group is all sorts of weird...

"J-Just be careful you don't break his neck..." I told Renge.

"Don't worry, we'll be done soon," he said reassuringly.

I then heard an ominous snapping sound. Revi frothed at the mouth and sank to his knees, with his butt swinging upward.

"We'll reduce any monster that attacks you to dust, so don't worry, Tina," Renge said with an innocent smile.

"...Yeah, sure."

"Go on," Eure urged me with a grin to step forward.

He gave me a thumbs-up, but when Renge said "You and Shinsen never stop Revi from running his big fat mouth, do you? Hm?" he went pale, knowing a worse fate awaited him.



"SO...about sixteen feet?"

"Yes..."

That night in Fort Deshmel's dining hall on the fourth floor, I told everyone my purification range. *A measly sixteen feet...!* It did work, though! I was really excited when I saw snake and bird monsters turn back into normal animals. Some monsters even turned into harmless cattle, much to my surprise. The others were all ordinary animals, so we released them back into the wild and left the cattle in the alliance's care.

"...That's a lot shorter than we thought," Dad remarked.

"Yes, well...she's only just getting used to the power, so that's about what we should expect," Renge intoned. "I'm just relieved the power isn't affecting her psyche. But I suppose we should set up the demon attracting barrier after she gets a bit more used to the Stella."

"But how are we going to do that?"

"Well, we'll be getting requests from other countries, including De Marl, to deal with monsters. So we...or rather, Tina...will take care of them until her range expands. And we'll protect her. Unless you still doubt us?"

"No, not at all." Dad shook his head.

Right, I'm not worried about that at all. Not after the spectacle Renge showed us...

"Of course, this all depends on if Tina is up for it, though..."

"Of course I am," I said.

"That's our awesome Holy Woman for you...!" Eure and Shinsen whispered as one behind me.

I turned around to ask them to stop calling me that. But their faces were so swollen from the beating Renge gave them, I couldn't

bear to look them in the eye and turned right back around. *Your punishment's a bit too harsh, Renge...!*

I only have one low-grade and a few high-grade tonics... Can holy magic heal this swelling? It looks painful. Though honestly, looking at them is kind of hilarious, too...!

"Then I'll have Marcus and Shinsen act as intermediaries with De Marl," Renge said.

"Aren't you going to help?" Dad asked.

"I'm only a proxy for King Curalius. Plus...they'll all be afraid of me."

"...They probably *will* be, yeah." Dad didn't deny it.

He leaned forward, scratching his chin with his right hand. Renge put on a big show in front of the alliance army this afternoon. And it was a very impactful first impression, given he saved them all from certain death.

Dad and I knew ahead of time that he was a Mythical Beast strong enough to be nominated to inherit the title of the King of Beasts. But even we couldn't help but gasp in surprise when we saw him fight.

From the alliance army's perspective, it must've looked like an even bigger threat than Edesa Kura had appeared out of nowhere. Dad and Shinsen were able to explain things to the army, but, except for Lico, who'd seen Renge's human form before, and Gildias, who'd seen his beast form, everyone was terrified.

The thought that Renge, with all his power, couldn't destroy the Sugula in the sky only made that black dot that much more frightening. *We can't let that thing get any bigger or closer. I need to learn magic that'll let me handle it... I hope that with the Stella in my possession, I'll be able to do it. I have to do everything in my power to stop it.*

"Oh! But if you do that, Dad, what about the Rofola Lodge...?"

If I'm here, and Dad has to handle discussions between the Mythical Beasts and the human nations, managing the inn will be difficult. Dad simply shrugged though, as if to say there was nothing we could do about it.

"Why don't you hire some of the former slaves?" Renge proposed with a smile from his perch on the couch.

"Where are they right now? Having dinner?"

"Well, we have a lot of rooms in the barracks, so housing them here isn't a problem. They're probably in those rooms. The only

issue is food. We brought supplies from the Mythical continent, but it's not enough to feed a hundred people..."

"There are *that* many of them?" Dad asked.

"Yeah. That said, thanks to them, we can fix the top floor Revi broke that much faster," Renge smiled.

Revi, who sat opposite him, averted his gaze uncomfortably. *Even with a smile, Renge keeps bringing up how he wrecked the top floor. After he was knocked out earlier today, Revi's been keeping quiet. I wish Renge would forgive the poor little dragon already...*

"But you can hire a few of them for the Rofola Lodge," Renge continued. "The leylines connect to the earth there, making it a bountiful area."

"That's true. Having more hands on deck would solve our labor shortage... And to begin with, with the roads closed off, we're not getting any customer traffic, anyway."

"U-Unfortunately..." I sighed.

There were so few customers that we could leave Nakona, René, and Moné to *handle the place on their own! Of course, having the liberated slaves stay there as guests would be wrong... What could we do with a hundred people?*

"Maybe we can ask Lico for help..." I suggested.

"No," Dad shot down the idea. "De Marl doesn't have the capacity to accept that many. They're hardly accepting refugees as it is."

"O-Oh yeah..."

And I guess we can't rely on De Marl too much. Still, this is a pickle...

"Why don't we just let them live here?"

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"There's plenty of unused flat land here. Normally, forts have fields and barns around them, but this one doesn't even have those. If they plow some fields on that flat land, they'll be able to provide for themselves. And we've plenty of rooms for them..."

"Oh, right!"

I did note the plains outside. It's a waste to not put all this land to use. They can plant fields here!

"And on top of that, the ground's quality is different from Rofola's, so maybe we can grow plants that aren't native to Rofola! Like ingredients for spices and coffee beans!" I said, my mind brimming with ideas.

Coffee beans! I can use alchemy to roast them. Incidentally, coffee is beloved by high society, and there are actually alchemists who make their living from roasting coffee beans. It's still accessible to commoners, though. In fact, many commoners probably only know alchemists because they roast coffee beans.

Some alchemists like Lico and alchemical apothecaries like me frown upon being placed in the same category as them. But as craftsmen, those alchemists can be pretty impressive!

"L-Like ingredients for chocolate?!" Renge sprang to his feet.

"Chocolate? Hm, well, some spices act as ingredients for it... And I *think* I can raise them here better than in Rofola..."

"I'll go make an earthquake to soften up the soil, then!" Renge said, looking like he was about to rush out of the room.

"M-Master Renge!"

"W-Wait just a minute, Master Renge!"

"A-An earthquake? No, I don't think that's a good idea!" I called out to stop him.

An earthquake feels like it's a little too large in scale, and he doesn't mean softening the land by liquefying it, does he?! As far as I know, liquefying only happens on reclaimed land, but Renge might just pull it off!

"And if you change the land's quality all of a sudden, it might make it so I can't grow anything here!"

"Aw... Okay, then...I won't..." he said with a sad whimper.

You can't cause earthquakes like it's nothing! Why is he so indiscriminate when it comes to sweets?! I might have underestimated how much of a sweet tooth he has...

"A-Anyway, why don't we use this land to cultivate spices and have them make a living off of that?" Dad asked.

"That's a great idea, Dad! You can only get certain spices from the demi-human continent and they aren't easy to find or get in volume..."

"With walls this high, we can probably raise some Rucks in here, too."

"Genius!" I clapped my hands together.

Rucks are this world's typical livestock. They're as large as cows, as round as pigs, chirp like birds, and are as strong as boars. The flavor of their meat greatly depends on where they're raised, and they can be cooked just like beef, pork, poultry, lamb, or fish. The cheese and butter of this world are mostly produced from Ruck

milk, too. The shape, flavor, and texture of these cheeses all vary greatly based on where they're made.

But while they might seem like the perfect livestock animals, bigger, more belligerent ones can attack and kill people. They can be hard to tame...hence why tall, sturdy walls were necessary.

"And the location isn't bad, either," Dad continued. "This fortress was always in the way when De Marl attacked Edesa Kura. But now that it's under our control, it's the best fortress we could ask for. We can use it as a garrison for the alliance army. We've got people to man the place now, after all."

"True. This is the World's Navel—there's a large leyline running through this land. Vegetables, fruit, grain, and crops should grow well here," Renge said.

"Really?!" I asked.

So we can grow all the usual vegetables here, too. And on top of that, we can grow coffee beans, spices, and all sorts of crops that weren't suitable for Rofola's soil... The possibilities are so vast, I can't wait! I should make a list with everything I want later!

"That said, the more people we gather here, the harder it'll be to hide where you are," Dad pointed out. "Even if we hide the fact you're a Spherit Folk, hiding the fact you have the Stella's going to be difficult..."

I winced.

"That'll be difficult, yes," Renge intoned gravely. "Then again, trying to lay hands on Tina would mean picking a fight with us. I guess we'll need to make everyone understand what that means..."

Revi raised his head wearily. Renge had a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes, but it was different from the way he looked at Revi earlier. I felt Eure and Shinsen, still waiting behind me, let out a chilling aura...

"Y-Yeah...that'll do it..."

The former slaves in Fort Deshmel saw Revi destroy this castle. And with how Renge scared the alliance army today...

After a moment of strained silence, Dad said with a nervous expression, "No one's stupid enough to try anything with you lot around..."

♣ May My Faith Be Eternal

THE liberated slaves were gathered up in Edesa Kura's dance hall. They each had names and lives of their own. I felt really bad about referring to them in such a generalized way, but there were just too many of them. So...I kind of *had* to.

Now then...

"Um, who are you?" I asked a couple of odd guests.

"I've beennnnnnn ordered by Master Rennnnnge to defennnnnd this castle," said a pretty lady with long, verdant hair and silver eyes. "I'm Jiril, a dryad."

"We are a mirage by the name of Fumia," said another pretty woman with golden hair and eyes. "We shall...allow you to call us by our name. Hmmm...you are the Holy Woman's father, are you not?"

"Y-Yes, I'm Marcus. A pleasure to meet you," I belatedly introduced myself.

They both have legs... Which I guess means that, like Shinsen, they're disguising their true forms. But they're definitely Mythicals. It feels weird seeing all these fantastical races just show up like this.

"Innnnnnidentally, where is Master Rennnnnge?" Jiril the dryad asked, trilling her Ns for some reason.

"Th-That's right! Hmmmm," Fumia the mirage looked around. "We were called here by Master Renge. W-We must...greet him properly."

"Y-Yes, we nnnnnneed to greet him. It is important."

...Yeah, it figures they came here for Renge. Between this and how the fairies in that Mythical inn were buzzing around him, I guess he's attractive even by Mythical Beasts' standards. Yeesh... I felt bad for them as they looked around, all fidgety, but...

"S-Sorry," I said, maybe a bit too quickly. "Renge isn't here right now. He's off taking my daughter back to Rofola. I reckon he's having dinner there, too."

"Aw..." The two Mythicals looked heartbroken.

Shinsen walked up from behind me and stood by my side. As

the two girls dropped their shoulders sadly, he chided them and told them, “You should at least *try* to hide your motives...”

“Isn’t it a shame, Miss Mirage?” Jiril asked. “We want to such lengths to pick the right clothes, but he’s not here...”

“Indeed,” Fumia nodded sadly. “We even had to curry favor with a mere human, only for Master Renge to not be here... My... *this* was a waste of energy if there ever was one!”

I snuck a glance at Shinsen, who simply stared back, as if to say, “Yeah, that’s just how they are.”

“We’ll leave the fort’s defenses to you,” Shinsen told them. “Once the Holy Woman is prepared, she’ll likely stay here for a while. I believe Master Renge will visit this place more often, then.”

“Really?!” the two of them asked as one.

“Yes. Master Renge and Master Revireus will serve as the Holy Woman’s direct guards. But I’m sure there are some things only women will be able to help her with. So, with that in mind...”

Shinsen turned his eyes to the dance hall. It was filled with all the former slaves, and we were there to choose some of them to help out with Rofola Lodge and find a couple of women who could help Tina with private matters. Of course, we’d be asking them what they *wanted* to do, and anyone who could help me would be welcome to join.

As the intermediary between the Mythical Beasts and the humans, my primary role was negotiating with De Marl. Hopefully, with De Marl’s help, we’d be able to share information with the demi-humans about the Sugula and the Kaguya with a will of its own.

But once the information spreads, it’s only a matter of time before people find out about Tina having the Stella’s power. And there’s a good chance people will try to take advantage of her somehow. After all, Renge and the other Mythicals say that the Stella’s bearer ought to be free to do as she pleases. They respect her freedom, and I know they’re determined to keep her safe.

I want the same thing. Tina should have the right to live as she pleases.

The knights of the different countries wouldn’t dare lay a hand on Tina after witnessing Renge’s power on the Caralius plains. But I could imagine some statesmen not understanding how dangerous he really was and still trying something. They’d probably even think of

trying to take advantage of Renge and his entourage along with her, like some kind of package deal.

“Phew...”

That’s why we had to carefully pick people that could help me and take care of Tina, too. It’d prevent other countries from just waltzing on in here with their own people, and everyone in this fort knew just how fearsome Mythicals could be. They wouldn’t try anything stupid. *Hopefully...*

“Let’s start the interviews, then. Could you line up according to what you’d like to do going forward? We need people to work the fields here at Fort Deshmel, people to help us out personally, and people to help tend to an inn located in Rofola. Please form a separate line if you’d rather not do any of those things.”

“If you wish to help at Fort Deshmel, stannnd in fronnnt of me,” Jiril said.

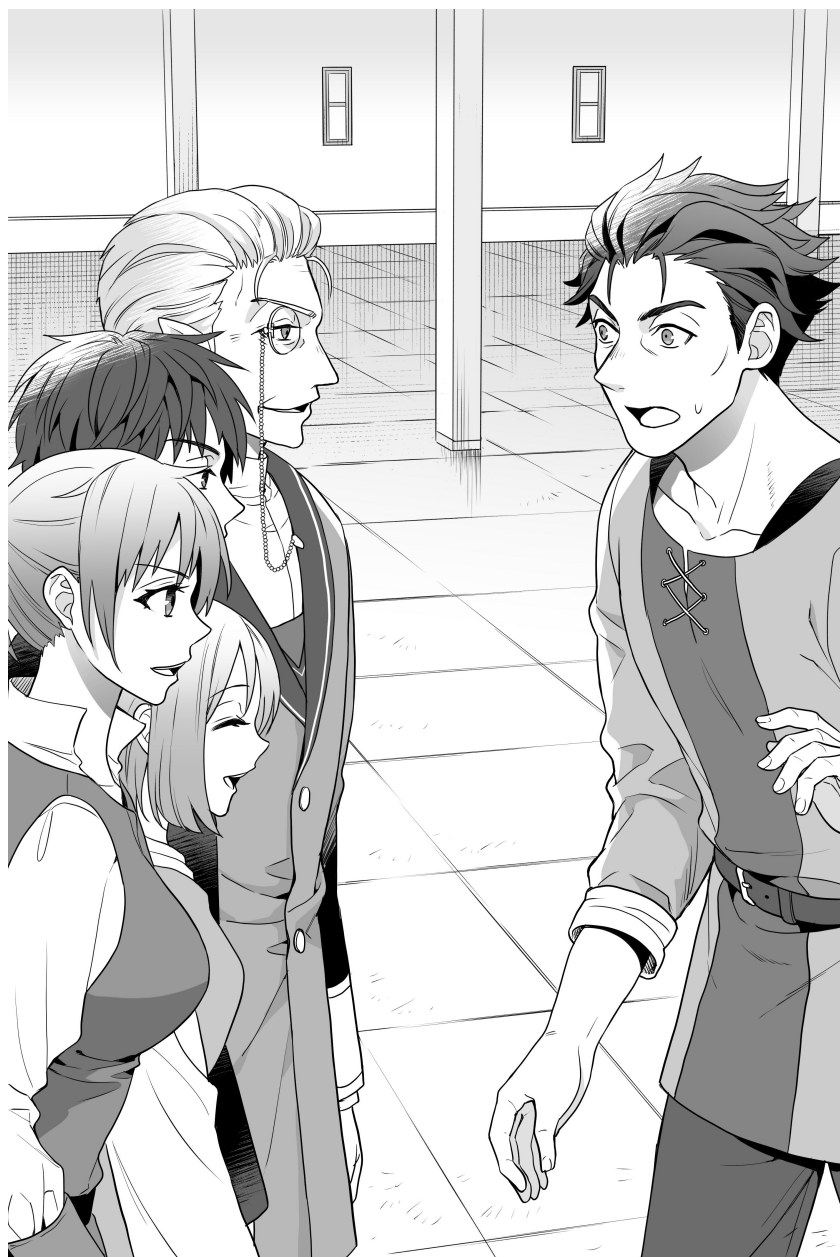
“If you want to help with Rofola Lodge, stand here,” Shinsen said.

“And if you want to do anything else, stand in front of us! We’ll hear your preferences!” Fumia said.

I was going to handpick the people who’d help Tina and me out. Just as I wondered how many people would even want to help with our personal matters, I found roughly twenty people lined up in front of me. *A respectable number.*

“Huh? Wait...you guys?!”

A group of four stood out to me in the line. An adventurer party I’d known for some ten years now. Aaron the young swordsman, the big sisterly ax-user Gina, the half-elf archaeologist Sirius, and Gina’s little sister, the prospective mage Mina...who now carried a spear on her back.



Six months ago, when I went to De Marl for Dirbleu's funeral, I'd left the Rofola Lodge in their care. *Why're they among the liberated slaves?!*

"Oh! Long time no see!"

"You say that, but it hasn't been *that* long since we last saw him."

"Ahahaha!" they laughed.

"Don't just laugh it off! What're you four *doing* here?"

"Well, you see...Mina..." Gina started.

"Yeah. Mina..." Aaron agreed.

"Indeed. Mina..." Sirius sighed.

"Ugh..." Mina hung her head.

"...Don't tell me. You heard you could find Spherit Stones in Edesa Kuran forts and snuck in here..." I said wryly.

"How did you know?!"

"Really...?" I cradled my head in disbelief.

To use magic, humans need to either master the mana recovery technique or use a Spherit Stone as a substitute for the Spherits. Unlike skills, magic requires a great deal of mana. Only the Spherit Folk can create Spherit Stones, and Edesa Kura had wiped out their forest in Jiera thirteen years ago. This had made the remaining stones' value skyrocket.

By now, you had to have a king's fortune to buy one of them. Those who already possessed them refused to sell them off, no matter how pressed they were for coin. Even retired sorcerers preferred to pass it down to their descendants as a family treasure.

"You idiot..." I muttered darkly.

"Aah! But...I mean...!" Mina floundered, trying to defend her honor.

"We...tried to stop her, for what it's worth?" Gina shrugged, somewhat embarrassed.

"We *told* her to give up and just settle for being a lance wielder," Sirius sighed, exasperated.

"But she just wouldn't hear it..." Aaron said. "In the end, we got captured, and they took our weapons. We were in real trouble back there, so that dragon *really* saved our hides."

"Revireus?" I guessed.

I snuck a glance at Shinsen, whose expression remained unchanged. Or rather...I couldn't really see it. His bangs covered

half his face, so I could only see his mouth. Without Renge around, I couldn't tell what went on in that mind of his.

"But I was surprised! I didn't think you and Tina would be involved with the Mythicals!" Aaron exclaimed.

"Yeah, well...let's just say fate works in mysterious ways."

Renge was the Mythical Beast who'd left Tina with me thirteen years ago. He recently told me that he'd been on the way to Jiera to find a Spherit Folk compatible with the Stella, completely unaware of the fact they were in an all-out war for their very survival. He'd arrived too late. He'd picked Tina up along the way, left her with me, and only realized what'd happened when he finally arrived in Jiera...

Seeing Jiera's ruins, Renge had thought the Spherit Folk were driven to extinction and had decided to look for a successor to the Stella among the demi-humans. But when the Stella resides within a human or a demi-human, it pollutes their mind and destroys their personality.

At the same time, he was investigating the different countries' state of affairs, inspecting their leylines, and exterminating monsters... He'd been busy trying to delay the Sugula's birth for the last thirteen years.

And yet...it'd been born just the same. And when it had been, he'd run into the baby he'd left with me thirteen years ago and realized she was the last surviving Spherit Folk.

"Is that person over there a Mythical in human form?" Sirius asked.

"Indeed. I am Shinsen, an orthrus."

"My, my! A pleasure to meet you! My name is Sirius," the half-elf introduced himself.

"Oh, right!" I interjected, suddenly remembering. "Shinsen, Sirius here is the current Elf of the Sun's father."

"Wh-Wh-Wh-What?!"

Shinsen stumbled over that three times.

"Hm? Did something happen with Shida?" Sirius asked me.

"Yeah. This is a good chance, actually. We've been wanting to ask Shida to help us."

"You want to ask *Shida* for help...?" he scoffed. "*That* one only listens to requests from pretty girls..."

"Ugh..."

"See, *this* is why I can't stand elves..." Shinsen whispered, not

very softly.

Believe me, I feel the same way! You wouldn't believe the sleazy things he said to Tina and Nakona!

"N-No, but you see, the world's at stake here..." I continued, trying to ignore Shida's rotten personality.

"Hm? What's this about?" Sirius asked.

"The world is at stake?" Aaron stared at us.

Sirius is Shida's father, after all. With this in mind, I took them aside and explained the situation. The black dot in the sky—the Sugula. A giant monster capable of growing large enough to swallow up all of Wisty Air. And how the only thing that could stop it was Tina's new power. The Stella.

I told them everything Renge had told me. But...

"Swallow all of..." Aaron murmured.

"Wisty Air?! That's absurd!" Mina cried.

"As a matter of fact, it nearly happened two thousand years ago," Shinsen said bluntly. "Master Renge destroyed the Sugula, but that still wasn't enough to stop the cataclysm. The Sugula rained down a dangerous material called the Kaguya onto the earth."

"And that Kaguya thing can swallow up anything and take its shape," I continued. "That's why all the old civilizations disappeared and why it took the world a thousand years to rebuild."

"....."

Sirius looked quite pale. He brought a gloved hand to his chin and patted it a few times, like he was calming himself. *Right...he's an archaeologist.*

"It...devoured entire civilizations...?" he muttered, apparently stunned.

"You think it's true, Sirius?" Aaron asked, a little dumbfounded.

"...I don't much like to admit it, but it does seem to have some credibility to it," he said. "There's a temple dedicated to the Elf of the Sun in Forestris. And a ceiling painting there *does* depict a black dot in the sky getting bigger and bigger. It then depicts it being burnt by the Sun King and forming the second sun. While I'd imagine there are a few differences between the stories here, I *think* that was the way the elves passed down the Sugula's story."

"No way... So...that thing's going to get big enough to swallow up the world?" Gina asked in disbelief.

"What's going to happen to us...?" Mina whispered anxiously.

“We’re trying to stop that from happening,” I told them. “But Edesa Kura’s been taken over by this annoying monster... A Kaguya with a will of its own that’s trying to nurture and raise the Sugula.”

“Seriously?!” the party cried.

I explained how the man called Mephisto Gudil, who Renge had burned away in the Caralus plains, was in fact the one who’d *created* the Sugula... The Dwarf inside the Bottle. Or rather, a copy of it that’d taken over a human vessel.

Like its name implied, the Dwarf inside the Bottle was small in size—a tiny Kaguya with a mind of its own. No matter how many times it splinters off, it remains small, Renge had explained. It desires limbs of its own, and since it’s so small, it can enter people’s minds and take over them as its vessels.

It can consume and dominate everything.

It’s ironic, really. Edesa Kura, just like their god, claimed to be the master race. And now this happened to them...

“To do something about Edesa Kura,” I concluded, “all the races need to understand exactly what kind of enemy we’re up against. If we don’t, it’ll take advantage of our ignorance.”

“Take advantage of our ignorance?” pondered Sirius. “That sounds awfully dangerous. And you’re talking about this Kaguya with a will of its own, yes?”

“Yeah,” I nodded. “That thing uses its words to wheedle its way into your mind to take over your body. Rejecting it is possible, though.”

“Huh? There’s a way to stop it from controlling you?! Tell me!” Gina implored.

“I wanna know too!” Mina nodded enthusiastically.

“It’s simple,” I said. “Simply assert that your body is your own. Doing so will make your soul reject the Kaguya. So long as it stays that small, your soul should be able to guard itself.”

Or so I’ve been told, I reflected. Renge said that the Kaguya that rained down after the Sugula’s destruction was too large to be rejected by sheer force of will. And it was so physically large that it’d crush you to death either way. But the Dwarf inside the Bottle is small, so your soul can protect itself.

A Kaguya is fundamentally a punishment, after all. A sinless soul won’t be punished. The issue is that this thing shakes people’s hearts using their own words and actions to force the punishment of itself on them. And knights like me, who kill people on the

battlefield, can be especially susceptible to such a punishment.

And the only ones who have the right to kill me over my actions are the loved ones of the people I've killed.

And...

I silently looked down at my right hand and clenched my fingers. The right hand Tina gave me, to repay the favor of having raised her.

I've...taken far too many lives. And then I lost my family and the home I thought I belonged in. But Ma and Pa reaccepted me into the nest after I'd already left it. Tina became my new family. Nakona still sees me as her father. And now there's Renémoné too, even though they've only been with us for six months.

Tina, if I hadn't met you, I'd have been all alone after Ma and Pa died. So having you repay me...? I should be the one thanking you. You gave me so much. And now, I owe you this arm, too.

"Anyway..." I looked at the party, stifling a sniffle, "if we all remember this, it should minimize our future losses."

By letting Tina heal my arm with the Stella...it felt like I'd been forgiven for my past failings. When that warm light enveloped me, it felt like all my sins were pardoned, and I'd been given some kind of divine redemption.

I will protect Tina. I'll protect her, Nakona, and Renémoné with my life. And I'll guard anyone who helps protect them, too. I'm sure that's why I was given my right arm back.

"We will defeat Edesa Kura and stomp out this evil, strong-willed Kaguya," I declared.

"So there's a new war on the horizon?" Gina asked.

"Yeah, but it'll be different from any other war waged before. All the races need to understand the threat and unite. We'll be fighting a calamity that could end the world. It'll devour anyone who lets down their guard and use them to multiply..."

"Indeed," Shinsen nodded gravely. "It'll just keep duplicating and expanding itself forever."

"....."

Aaron and Mina fell silent. Gina's expression was severe, and Sirius thoughtfully stroked his chin again. *That monster can use the slightest opening to appear time and time again. It really is a horror.*

"...So that's the Kaguya with a will of its own..." Sirius said at last. "The Dwarf inside the Bottle... If being aware of its effects is enough to stave off its influence, then we really *should* tell

everyone. However..."

"Huh? There's *more*?!" Aaron said, a little whiny. "Why does there always have to be something *more*, Sirius?!"

"Even if we inform others, they'll still present an opening to the Kaguya if they don't truly understand," the old half-elf said. "And not informing others properly will be meaningless... Yes, this'll certainly be backbreaking work."

"Right, and that's why I need help. From all sorts of people," I replied.

We don't know where that thing could strike from. Or how many copies of it are out there. Renge said there was a main body, but the copies would remain even if you destroyed it, since they were already established individuals.

Races with a keen smell could sniff out its nasty odor and find its hiding places. Its scent—or presence, if you like—is quite strong, and most Mythicals can successfully identify it. In that regard, their assistance would be indispensable for us.

But if all races, be they human or demi-human, could be made aware and capable of rejecting it, this free-willed Kaguya would be rendered powerless.

"Everyone has to understand properly... Rumors will only end up spreading misinformation," Aaron mused.

"Right," Sirius nodded. "Spreading rumors is easy, but they can easily twist into misinformation. And a good banner for that—as much as I don't like treating him as one—would certainly be Shida."

"Hm?"

Sirius closed his eyes. I recognized his expression. *It's the face of a father.* I felt a chill build up in the pit of my stomach.

"The problem," Sirius pondered, "is whether we'll be able to convince people to discard the gods they believe in."

"....."

So that's why I felt that chill. My faith in the Gods of De Marl. Was my faith in them all these years a mistake...? No.

"They...don't have to discard their faith. They just need to believe in something more," I concluded.

"Oho! Can they do that, though?" Sirius asked.

"Yes. Same as how I can believe in Tina...and in all of you."

♣To Live With Strength

EDESA KURA had a nasty habit of abducting and enslaving travelers. I, too, had the misfortune of being captured—as a “rare breed of animal.” They tied me up, threw me into a jute bag, and carried me off to a concentration camp.

There, I met a girl who called out to me. Moné.

She, along with her parents and older twin brother, made their living as traveling minstrels. Her dances were simple ones, and the songs she could sing were rather short. But seeing a girl her age earnestly try to perform was an adorable enough sight to warm hearts and loosen the purse strings of any adult.

Yes, Moné was a sweet girl. Despite being imprisoned in a concentration camp where screams of agony were constantly heard, she cared for me. She gave me a name: Mujimuji. She’d patted me lovingly. And all this despite me being a far cry from what one would call cute.

She and her brother had been separated from their parents and thrown in a cell. Even then, she’d secretly, silently practice her dancing to distract herself. I wondered to myself how long she’d have to live like this. I was one thing, but Moné and her brother, René, were far too young to go through this.

Such small children shouldn’t be separated from their parents, to say nothing of being thrown in a prison cell. Edesa Kura was an unforgivable country. I understood fully now *why* my mother had loathed that country so much.

The day after I’d reached that conclusion, René was dragged out of their cell by a stone-faced soldier. It was only by clinging together that these two were able to comfort one another amidst the pain of being separated from their parents. The mere act of separating them from their parents was terrible in and of itself, but would they go so far as to separate the children themselves?

If only I’d been bigger, more mature...I never would’ve allowed it. But sadly, I was still a child myself: only slightly older than these two. In human years, I was only fifteen years old, sixteen

at best.

As he was dragged off, René shouted at me to keep Moné safe. Moné clung to the bars and called for her brother as the door mercilessly slammed shut. The other prisoners chided her, telling her not to anger the guards. And so, Moné returned to her hard bed, weeping bitter tears.

Five hours later, the door suddenly reopened.

“Moné!”

“D-Daddy!”

“Are you all right?! Oh, thank goodness... Don’t worry, we’ll leave soon! René’s behind that purple door! I have to go save Mommy, all right? Everyone, run! There’s a fire!”

Moné’s father had opened all the prison cell doors with a key. The other prisoners ran for their lives, leaving me, Moné, and her father behind. But her father was a brave man. And he willingly ran back into this burning nightmare to rescue his wife.

“I’ll come with you!” she told him.

“No! Go save René and then get out of here as fast as you can! Don’t worry! As long as we survive, we’ll meet again! Get out of here and head for De Marl! That’s the safest country for you!”

“Daddy!”

“Mujimuji, take care of René and Moné!” her father told me as he left.

“Wait, don’t go! Don’t leave me all alone! Daddy!”

We ran out into the corridor. The stench of the smoke was suffocating. There really was a fire. And prisoners and guards alike were running in the opposite direction of the smoke. Only Moné’s father headed back into the blaze.

The scent of the fire and smoke was getting closer. It was dangerous to be there, and while I didn’t know precisely what’d happened, I did know we needed to flee outside as soon as we could.

“Mujimuji! Muji! Muji!”

Moné, you must do as your father says. We must find the purple door quickly!

I tugged on Moné’s tattered cloth gown, trying to relay my thoughts. With tears running down her cheeks, she wiped her eyes with one hand and whispered, “...The purple door.”

Yes, let’s find the purple door and save René as soon as we can!

...Assuming he’s still all right...

"Aaah, ooh... *Kha, kha...*!" she coughed from the smoke.

"Mujimuji, mujimuji!" I cheered her on.

"There...the purple door... René, René!"

Finding the right door, Moné opened it. I could smell René...or rather, his blood. We found him lying on a bed with a red stone buried into his forehead. It was awful...!

Thankfully, the stone wasn't poisoned in any way. It was just a red glass stone. *Why would they force that into a child's body...?*

"Mujimuji! Mujimuji!" I squeaked at the boy, trying to wake him up.

"René! René, wake up! *Ngha!*" Moné coughed as she tried to rouse her brother.

"Ugh..."

The smoke is coming here, too...! Hurry, let's go! The heat's closing in on us! And what's this odd feeling...?! Are there monsters nearby?!

It was rather likely they were. Monsters are drawn to highly populated areas with a lot of negative emotions. A large place with a lot of people fleeing in fear would be what they were looking for!

"Muji! Muji!" I urged her.

"...Yeah, I know! *Nnnng!*" She picked René up.

Supporting his weight between us, we managed to leave the room. The fire was close, which was very bad. If there were any flammable liquids around, this room could explode at any second. We had to run... I could smell the scent of charred flesh.

"Mujimuji!"

Over here! I can smell the outside air! Keep going, Moné! You have to get outside so you can meet your parents again!

"René! Moné!"

"Daddy! Mommy!"

"Oh, thank goodness... You two are all right...!"

It's their parents! We were lucky enough to find them as soon as we left the room. This must be fate's way of rewarding Moné's kindness! But still, René was terribly ill, and their mother soon realized this. She kneeled before her children and wept, running her hand over his forehead. The sheer cruelty of doing this to a child...! I was enraged.

"There they are! Don't let them escape!"

"Kuh! Enofa, take Mujimuji and the kids and run! I'll distract them!"

"What are you saying?! The fire's still spreading! Let's hurry

and run!”

“...The monsters locked up here escaped. They want to use us as bait for the monsters so they can escape safely themselves... You understand?”

“Ah!”

“Daddy...?” Moné looked to her father.

“Muji...”

No... He can't mean to... No! He's throwing himself against monsters for his wife and children? And there are monsters inside here, too?

No, you can't, Moné's Father! No number of people can defeat a monster! Not even us Mythicals can truly defeat them! You won't survive if you do this!

“Don't worry. We'll meet again in De Marl. We'll be safe there. Don't worry about that rock either. Their medicine is advanced. I'm sure they'll take it out of René's forehead.”

“...Fine. But you have to make it, no matter what!” Moné's mother said.

“I will.”

The parents embraced one last time, and the mother led her children and me to the entrance. But as we ran, the flames finally blocked our path.

“Ugh! Ah...Moné!”

“Mommy?!”

The mother took the children and me and hid in a nearby room. Thankfully, it had a window. But it had a lattice over it, preventing us from passing. Just as I was wondering what we could do about it, she began casting a spell.

“Air Mass!”

A lump of condensed air blew the lattice off the window frame. But it was...

“You can get out through here! Hurry!”

“Mommy! Mommy!”

She let Moné out first, then pushed René through the window. As she did, she spoke to me.



“Mujimuji, please! Watch over those two! You must be a Mythical, right? Help them escape...! Take them to De Marl...and if De Marl is no good, go to a roadside inn called the Rofola Lodge! Please! There’s a skilled apothecary there; I’m sure she’ll be able to do something about René’s forehead. Please...!”

She wept, imploring me—an infant like me. Yes, I might be older than these little ones, but I’m still an infant Mythical Beast. The mother embraced me and punctuated her request with one final “please,” before giving me a push to leave.

Even with the lattice broken, the window was small. Too small for an adult to pass through. Only a child could’ve passed through it.

“Run, Moné! Mujimuji will guide you somewhere safe! Take care of René! I’ll go back and bring Daddy...!”

“M-Mommy! Mommy!” Moné called out after her.

“...You have to survive...”

“Aah...!”

The smoke approached, growing larger by the second, blocking the mother’s face from view. The flames then flared up with the loud crack of burning wood. A pillar of fire burst out the window. Something flammable must have burst into flames, making every other flammable object in the room catch fire...

“M-Muji...!” I urged Moné.

She got to her feet, pulling her brother by the arm as she headed to the plains. Her expression was blank, and there was no light to her eyes.

Why? Why did such a sweet little girl have to be put through this?! Is this what the human continent is like...? Is the world really this terrible?!

“Muji muji! Mujiiii!” I cried at Moné, spurring her ahead.

“Haa, haa... Haa, haa... Ah...!”

As soon as we left the facility grounds, we found something staring at us with countless eyeballs. *A monster.*

No, wait...a zombie!

“Ah...!” Moné gasped in fear.

What’s a zombie doing here?! But I couldn’t dwell on this question.

We have to run, fast!

“No, no... Help me... Somebody help me... Mommy...”

Daddy...! Please, somebody help us!"

After that, we were miraculously saved. The zombie was so focused on toying with us that it gave us the chance we needed to run into someone strong enough to stop it. But even so, I thought the frustration smoldering in my heart would never die down.

My heart was so moved by this human child. Even as she ran, her face streaked with tears and covered in blood, soot, and mud, I could do nothing except to only cry alongside her.

I might be an infant, but I'm still the lowest grade Mythical Beast. And despite this, I could do nothing to protect a human child so much younger than me.

"Just the unusual creature I was looking for."

"...!"

When we reached that Regalia place, René and Moné were given medical care, and I came along with them. There I was spoken to by the man who had assisted the heroes who'd tried to save us.

René and Moné were still asleep. I sat curled up with my eyes open in their room. I hopped to my feet when I saw I was in the presence of the most powerful one.

"Mujimuji!"

"Yes, they're away right now. You were the one who called me to that place, right?"

"Mujimuji, muji! Mujimujimuji!"

"Not at all. If anything, I should be the one thanking you. Thanks to you, I found the one I was looking for."

But despite those words, his expression was dark. This was the strongest Mythical Beast on the Mythical continent—Master Renge! He'd come to the human continent to find a proper wielder of the Stella. The wielder of the Stella must have a special heart and body, I knew that much.

I'd happened to know there was another Mythical around. So I'd used my cry to call to him and inform him of our plight. But I'd never expected the strongest Mythical Beast in the world to come to my aid. Calling it luck was an understatement.

Again, this must be Moné being rewarded for her kind heart. I'm sure of it. Still, my brother should've been with Master Renge. When I asked where he was, Master Renge said they were working separately at the moment.

Besides...he might be my brother, but unlike me, he's a direct descendant of King Curalius. And me...I'm a dragon who was merely hatched from an egg that fractured off of King Curalius's tail. My brother, who was born of an egg she laid during spawning season, is worthy of being called a direct offspring. But not me...

"So, what will you do?" Master Renge asked me. "To begin with, what are you even doing here? I can't imagine King Curalius would let an infant like you leave the Mythical continent."

"Mujimuji."

"I see. You fell into an illusion pool and got separated from her. Illusion pools *do* send you to completely random places and appear at random times."

"Mujimuji, muji, mujimuji, mujimujimuji!"

"I see... I'll talk with King Curalius about it for you, then. I think it's a good idea, personally. It'll be a good way for you to grow and learn more."

"Mujimuji!"

I bowed my head to him thankfully. I decided I'd keep Moné and René safe until both of them died. Their parents asked me to take care of them, and I'm sure that was something they wished they could've done themselves. They were pressed hard enough to put their trust in me, even though I was a strange, incomprehensible creature to them. In which case, I had a duty to meet their trust.

You can rest in peace, Moné and René's parents. I will grow strong and protect your hatchlings. After all, I'm an infant of the dragon clan of Mushufushu—the species that reigns supreme over this world.



AFTER that, Moné and René got better, and we became employees at the Rofola Lodge for the family that'd helped us. Well, I say employees, but it was in name only. Of course, being the earnest children that they are, Moné and René didn't hesitate to help out. But since they were still small children, the family took them in and assumed the role of their guardians.

If I was a human adult, I would've taken them in and raised them myself. But... well, I'm neither. But really, humans grow up so quickly. It only took a year for the girl that'd saved Moné and René,

Tinaris, to become the new Holy Woman and move into Fort Deshmel. And the twins turned eight.

“Here’s your order!”

“Thank you, Moné. Good on you; you got the orders right.”

“I was a little sad to see Tinaris and Nakona get older... But seeing a little girl work so hard gives me the strength to work harder, too!”

“You’re being a creep. But Moné and René really *are* working hard here! I’ll give you a generous tip.”

“Oh, thank you!”

The customers of the inn watched Moné and René work with delighted eyes. *If only I had human limbs, I could help out around the inn, too. But I can at least—*

“Oh, it’s so cute! What is this little thing!?”

“Mujimuji!”

“Ahaha, it’s got a funny cry! Are you the inn’s pet?”

“I’ve heard rumors this inn has this weird pet! That’s why I came to check the place out! But really, what are you, you little thing...?”

“It’s *cute*, though! Its fur is so soft. Gosh, it’s so cuddly!”

“And sweet!”

I can do this. Loiter around the inn’s sign and draw travelers—mostly women—to the inn. And then I’ll lie down on the wooden deck and offer them emotional support! I can’t do much, but I can do something!

“Say, have they stopped selling medicine here? When Tinaris was around, they’d sell medicine here all the time,” one of the guests asked Nakona over the counter.

Nakona, who was checking the guest register, looked up and said, “We still have some.” But her attitude was far from welcoming.

Her lack of enthusiasm was understandable. The Rofola Lodge’s medicine was handmade by Tinaris and was much more effective than most medicines. They always sold very well, and the stockpile ran out rather quickly. This meant that the inn’s current stock of medicine was lacking. Hence her dissatisfied expression.

“I’d like five low-grade tonics.”

“I’m sorry. Low-grade tonics are in high demand, so we only have two of them left in stock.”

"I-I see. Then I'll take those and one medium-grade tonic."

"Thank you for your patronage."

"I'd like one medium-grade tonic, too. And do you have any antidotes?"

"You got it! You're in luck; it's our last antidote."

When one guest asked for medicine, other people started flocking to the counter and asking to buy some too. But sadly, we didn't have enough to meet their demand. So soon enough, we ran out of stock.

"W-We're sold out! No more medicine!" Nakona announced, raising her hands.

The customers who hadn't managed to buy any in time dropped their shoulders. They started asking when we'd renew the stock and when Tinaris would come back.

Tinaris's cooking and medicines were the inn's strongest selling points. Nakona could cook too, but she was more suited to heavy lifting. If we ran out of medicine, prospective guests might lose interest.

"Okay, okay, settle down, please! I'll take your orders for medicine and give them to Tina. Write what medicine you need and how many bottles and then sign it. I'll give you a claim tag, so don't just jot it down and leave, understood?"

"Oh. I appreciate it!"

Nakona handled it all well. She wrote stuff down on an order form and made some claim tags. Her idea was to send these forms to Tinaris at Fort Deshmel and have her send the medicine back. A smart idea.

"....."

I spotted Moné staring at Nakona. *What is she thinking?*



THAT night. Moné returned to her room and climbed onto her bed, where she spoke to her brother with clenched fists.

"Huh? You want to go gather ingredients...?"

"Yeah! I mean, we need a lot of medicine, or Big Sis Nakona's gonna be in trouble, right? So...I thought I'd go gather some Duana flowers by the highway."

Duana flowers are an ingredient used to make the low-grade

tonic—or the healing salve, as it’s often called. It’s cheap medicine that’s beloved by travelers. After Tinaris taught her how to brew medicine using alchemy, Moné began aspiring to become an alchemical apothecary just like her.

However, brewing medicine using alchemy isn’t so simple. Tinaris makes it look easy. But that’s because she’s a Spherit Folk. The Spherit Folk can—well, *could*—freely convert the Air into mana. Being a Spherit Folk lets her forgo the need to use the Spherits, since she is essentially one.

She can basically use mana all she wants. It might not have always worked when she was younger, but now that she’s matured and has the Stella’s power too, there’s probably no medicine beyond her ability to make.

So if Moné was trying to become like her, it’d be a goal higher than Mount Rofola itself. I had every intention of helping her, of course, but I couldn’t blame René for being apprehensive.

The road leading up to the highway was part of the inn, but it was a five-minute walk there. It was a one-way, lightly paved road surrounded by woods. It was dangerous since you could sometimes run into wild animals from the forest.

Wouldn’t the mountain be safer, then? There’s a flower field halfway up there.

René also seemed to remember that, because he asked, “Can’t you just get it from the mountain?”

“I *did* get ingredients from the mountain before...” Moné started saying, then trailed off.

If she exhausts its supply of plants, she might never be able to collect ingredients there again. Giving up is a wise decision.

“How about Big Sis Tinaris’s herb garden? Can’t you just borrow some from there?” he suggested.

“No, it only has ingredients for medium or high-grade tonics. They’re rare herbs. I can only make low-grade ones, so I probably can’t use them right... And customers *want* the low-grade ones anyway.”

“Oh...okay then...”

Moné understands the difference. Good for her! She really has been learning and knows how to adjust to both her abilities and the customers’ demands. That’s wonderful!

“So...René, can you handle my chores tomorrow?”

“...Just take Mujimuji with you,” René said grumpily.

"I will! Mujimuji, will you come with me?" Moné asked me.

"Mujimuji!" I agreed.

Of course I will, René! I'll keep Moné safe. No matter what may come, I will protect her!

I nodded, but René still looked concerned. As young as he was, he still felt a great deal of responsibility as her older brother. His fretting over her was understandable to me.

However, their parents had asked me to watch over them. So he had nothing to worry about.

I will guard you until the day you die. You can sleep easy tonight.



THE next day, Moné took the day off and left the house for the highway with Nakona's permission. Normally, it was a five-minute trip, but it'd take much longer while looking for herbs. She probably preferred to look in the woods and near the highway itself, too, but with more monsters popping up, she'd been told it was too dangerous.

So long as she stayed in a place people could reach, Nakona could hurry over and help her if needed. I assumed Moné knew this and would avoid trouble, but you never know...

"Be back before lunch!" Nakona called out.

"Okay!" Moné replied, waving

She headed down the road to the highway. I ran after her, finding her squatting by the roadside in search of herbs.

"Hm, here're some Lilith and Solan flowers... But I can't find any Duana..."

The antidote was made from Solan flowers, the antipyretic from Lilith flowers, and the healing salve was made from Duana flowers. Mixing them with water and mana produced those elementary concoctions.

Moné was practicing basic alchemy with these ingredients and water. She couldn't make them with the same accuracy Tinaris could. She failed sometimes, and her quality wasn't very high.

Still, the Ril family helped the twins and gave them a roof over their heads and all life's necessities. Both Moné and René felt quite obliged to them. And so did I, of course. That's why Moné worked so hard to help out at the inn the Ril family managed and why I was

so inclined to help her.

That said...I don't know the first thing about medicinal herbs!

"Hey, you. What're you doing over there?" a voice suddenly called.

"Huh?"

"Muji?"

I knew someone was nearby, but I hadn't expected them to call out to us. A young man, who looked to be breathing heavily, was approaching Moné. He had a sword sheathed at his waist, so I suspected he was some kind of traveler. *He's not thinking of abducting her, is he...?*

"Mujimuji!" I barked at him menacingly.

"Whoa, what is that thing?!" the traveler flinched, stepping back.

"Mujimuji, what if it's a guest?" Moné chided me.

"Mujimuji..." I whined.

Tch. I can't argue when you put it that way.

I'd jumped between them to scare him away but now walked back to her side. I was still ready to pounce when needed.

"I'm sorry. Are you here for the inn?" Moné asked.

"Yes, I've heard the Rofola Lodge was nearby and that they sell medicine. I'm Sax from Fei Lu. My wife's morning sickness is getting quite bad, and Fei Lu's doctors recommended your medicine. Do you have anything for morning sickness?"

"M-Morning sickness?"

What kind of sickness is that? I wondered. Moné looked at the man, confused.

"I-I'm sorry... I'm still learning alchemy... I don't know what 'morning sickness' means..."

"O-Oh, I see... I suppose a girl your age wouldn't know. I'm sorry. When a pregnant woman feels sick, it's called morning sickness. Different people have different symptoms, and in my wife's case, she loses her appetite and has swelling in her feet and hands. The vomiting is pretty awful..."

"I-I see..."

Oh, so that's what human women go through when pregnant. Apparently, as the man explained, other symptoms of morning sickness included fatigue, loss of weight, dizziness, heart palpitations, and constipation. As one approaches their term, the pressure on their internal organs can cause loss of appetite and

constant urination, gastritis, and hip pain. All the symptoms this man heard from the doctors sounded quite terrible... And apparently, it was only part of them!

"I-I didn't know getting pregnant could make you so sick...!" Moné said, visibly rattled.

"Apparently, it can," the man said, frowning. "I only found out after my wife got pregnant..."

"W-Wow..."

That sounds scary! So that's what human pregnancy is like... Us Mythicals are usually born from eggs, so I don't understand why their pregnancy has to be so troublesome.

"I'm sorry... I don't really know much about pregnancy..." Moné apologized.

"Oh, no, it's fine. Anyway, the Rofola Lodge is that building up ahead, right?"

"Ah, yes. But we don't have anyone who can brew medicine right now..."

"What?! Oh, *no*... After I came all the way here..."

I didn't know where Fei Lu was located, but it didn't sound very close. By the time he'd get back home, the sun would've set, and wild animals become more active during the night. *He'd probably be better off staying here.*

"Mujimuji, Mujimuji!"

"Hm? Oh, yeah, you're right! We might still have some medicine in stock, so you should check at the inn anyway."

That was a very subtle way to persuade him, Moné!

"That's true... I'd appreciate it if you could show me what you have in stock."

"I'll show you the way!"

Moné was very responsible. She escorted the guest to the inn. On the way there, we ran into René, who'd come to get her since it was almost time for lunch. Upon entering the inn, the guest approached Nakona at the counter and asked her about the medicine. But, as expected, we didn't have the medicine he needed set aside.

Nakona wrote down his order and told him to wait a few more days. The guest said he'd be heading back tomorrow, though, since he was worried about his wife.

I can understand him being concerned about his wife if she's unwell.

Seeing this exchange, Moné hung her head.

“What’s wrong?” René asked her.

“René, I... I can’t do anything to help... If I was more like Big Sis Tinaris, I could make any medicine he needed...”

“You’re letting that get to you again? You’re just normal. But Tinaris is special. Like... Holy Woman special. You can’t be like her.”

“Boo!” Moné pouted at him.

René was right, though.

Sax—the guest—didn’t feel comfortable renting a room for one. So instead, he set up camp at the lakeside. He also borrowed a fishing rod so he could fish for dinner. A wise decision, since he needed to save money for his wife’s medicine.

Seeing this kind man who cared for his wife seemed to remind René and Moné of their parents.

“René, I’ll go look up how to make medicine for morning sickness in the study!” Moné said.

“Geez...” René sighed. “Hey, Mujimuji, bring her back when it’s time for dinner, okay?”

“Mujimuji!”

I followed Moné as she climbed up to the second floor’s study. This room was originally used by Marcus Ril’s father as the management room for the inn. Its shelves were packed with books divided by topic: cooking, magic, alchemy, as well as old ledgers and guest registers.

This was where Tinaris had studied alchemy. But like René said, she was special—the world’s last Spherit Folk. That gave her the talent to produce potions and medicine that humans and demi-humans would fail to make.

That was a gap no amount of effort on Moné’s side could reach. It’d take her decades to reach Tinaris’s level. Her human lifespan might mean she’d never reach that level at all.

So if she was intent on trying despite that, I had to help her in any way I could.

She pulled out all the alchemy books from the shelves and lined them up on the floor. She opened them and checked their table of contents one by one.

“Ah, here! Medicine for morning sickness!” she said and started flipping through the book. But as soon as she found the page she was looking for, her expression clouded over. “There are so

many ingredients...”

“Mujimuji?”

“Y-You see, it says that it’s because...because different women have different symptoms! So there’s no real medicine for morning sickness. But medicine to combat individual symptoms can be useful for it.”

“Mujimuji.”

That *did* sound like what that man Sax needed. That’s why Moné was so depressed. But she could just make medicine to curb the symptoms, right?

“Mujimuji, Mujimuji!” I told her, prompting Moné to raise her head.

“But there are so many ingredients. I’ve never made medicine with more than three ingredients...”

“Mujimuji...”

Hmm, since a pregnant mother is going to drink this, Moné can’t very well put her at risk...

“Mujimuji?”

Did we need to sit by and wait until Tinaris made the medicine for him? Moné wanted to be an alchemical apothecary like Tinaris, right?

“I want to be like Big Sis Tinaris, but she told me medicine can have side effects that make symptoms worse. So I shouldn’t overestimate my abilities...and that medicine can cure people, but it can be like poison if not handled carefully. So I have to study a lot more. And I shouldn’t give someone medicine I didn’t make carefully.

“M-Mujimuji~.”

How admirable, Moné! Who’d believe an eight-year-old could be so responsible? Simply lovely!

But in that case, we can’t very well force it.

Is there anything else we can do— Hm?

“Mujimuji! Muji!” I jabbered, pointing to a passage with my paw.

“Huh? What’s wrong, Mujimuji— Hormone adjustment medicine?”

According to the book, women have small bits of matter called hormones in their bodies meant to promote their womanly functions. The balance of those hormones falls apart in pregnant women, which can cause the illness they feel. But the book said this

hormone adjustment medicine might help alleviate it.

It was fairly weak medicine that'd only alleviate the symptoms, making them a bit easier to deal with. But all of its ingredients were findable here in Rofola, and many of them were ingredients Moné had used before.

Also, this was a medicine that had to be taken over a period of time. Just taking it once wouldn't make the patient feel better. It had to be taken slowly over a few days. Meaning the medicine wouldn't strain the body as much.

"I think I can make this!" Moné exclaimed.

"Mujimuji!"

"Yeah! Let's go look for the ingredients! It says we need toetuls, Rofola mushrooms, Duana flowers, Lilith flowers, Solan flowers...and the powdered bone of the Rofola Totora fish!"

"Mujimuji!"

Moné wrote down the ingredients, vigorously got to her feet, and made to leave the study. But I urged her to stop! *She forgot to put the books back on the shelf!*

"Mujimuji!"

"Huh? Oh, the books! Big Sis Nakona would get mad if I left them like this! Thanks for telling me, Mujimuji!"

"Mujimuji!"

Moné, being the good girl that she is, put everything back the way it was before she left to look for ingredients. We went downstairs to the reception desk, and from there, Moné went out to the campsite to find Sax.

"Mister Sax!"

"Oh, you're the girl from before... What's wrong?"

Moné wanted to ask him for permission before she attempted the medicine. She explained what she'd found, and upon hearing it might help his wife feel a bit better, Sax nodded firmly.

"Please make it for us! I can't *stand* to see my wife in so much pain. Please, if it can help her feel even a little better...!"

"O-Okay! I'll do my best!"

And so a deal was struck. She then ran over to Tinaris's herb garden to pick toetuls. The garden was surrounded by a firm wooden fence, and next to the fields were also potted plants and some plants grown in a small, makeshift greenhouse.

Nakona had the key to the herb garden, though. Being a strong fighter, Nakona managed all the keys for the Rofola Lodge. But

Moné seemed to have forgotten that.

“Oh, the key!” she remembered as she approached the door.

Hanging her head, she returned home.

“Big Sis Nakona, can I have the key for the herb garden?”

“You’re supposed to say hello first!”

“Ah! Um...hello!”

“Good girl! So what did you need? The key to the herb garden? What for?”

Moné hid behind the doorstep like she was afraid of being scolded. Still, greeting people properly is important, especially at home. Moné explained her reasons, at which Nakona nodded in understanding.

“Do it tomorrow. It’s almost time for dinner, and you can’t take any herbs from Tina’s garden without asking her for permission. Some of those ingredients are apparently really expensive! And they can be dangerous, too.”

“Ummm... But toetuls are safe...”

“Maybe, but maybe they cost a lot. Remember how Tina had to negotiate with Mister Giyaga to get some of those plants in exchange for high-grade tonics? She might get angry if you use them without permission.”

“Oh no...!”

Are those herbs really that expensive? If they are, Moné really does need to ask for permission. What’ll you do now, Moné?

“Show me the ingredients,” Nakona said.

“H-Here,” Moné handed over the note to her.

“Let’s see...”

After examining the note, she came up with a compromise and gave it back to Moné.

“There’s an herb growing in the garden called Migu grass. It grows really fast, and Tina uses it to make bandages. They sell for fifty colts a piece, and a healing salve sells for 200 colts. Bandages are very popular with travelers because they can buy a lot of them for the price of one healing salve, and we can make them en masse, so it turns a real profit. You’ve made it before, right?”

“Uh-huh.”

It was one of the simpler medicines even a novice alchemical apothecary could make. Moné helped Tina make them from time to time.

“So if you mix Migu grass with Duana flowers, you get

compress medicine. You soak a dry fabric in it and put it on an injury. Those cost 500 colts. It's not hard to make, costs a lot, and travelers buy it, too. Could you make fifty bandages and three compress medicines by tomorrow? That's what the clients leaving tomorrow ordered. If you can make that, I'll use that money to buy those toetuls off of Tina."

"Really?!"

"How about it?"

That's a great idea! Putting it in as an order with her will give her real experience!

"I'll do it!"

"Great! Then have it ready by tomorrow. And here's the key to the garden. Bring it back when you're done. Dinner will be ready in an hour, so finish collecting what you need by then."

"Okay!"

"Mujimuji, I'm counting on you to make sure Moné doesn't do anything naughty!"

"Mujimuji!"



I didn't think she honestly assumed Moné would do anything naughty, but she is still an eight-year-old girl. She very well could accidentally drop a pot or something. So I swore to keep a good eye on her!

By the time Moné returned to the herb garden, the sun was beginning to dip beneath the mountain. The day *had* gone by awfully quick. We needed to gather all the ingredients before the sun set.

"Hm, we need this. And this..."

I wasn't knowledgeable about herbs. But Moné knew what to gather, thanks to her studies. She put everything in a basket and covered it with a cloth.

"That just leaves..."

Moné got to her feet and checked the crops growing in the garden. She gathered the three flowers she needed from there. Many types of medicine use Duana, Lilith, and Solan flowers, so this field had many pots with those flowers. Moné gathered some Duana, then looked for Lilith and Solan flowers.

"I'll definitely use these to make the hormone adjustment medicine!"

"Mujimuji!"

We weren't making that medicine tonight, but she was setting it aside for tomorrow. And making that statement mattered. *She can definitely make it!*

"Let's go back, Mujimuji!"

"Mujimuji!"



AFTER dinner...

"Let's do this! Time to make bandages and compress medicine!" Moné said, pumping herself up.

"Mujimuji!"

"Why am I here too...?" René grumbled.

We borrowed Tinaris's workshop to make the medicine. We had René here to help us pack and bottle the results. To make the bandages, Moné needed to put the Migu leaves in the pot, pour in a small amount of mana, then mix it until it turned adhesive. But

apparently, there was a trick to making them in large amounts. After all, the mana had to spread thoroughly and evenly across all the leaves.

Nakona had asked Moné to make fifty bandages. So, if Moné didn't want to fail the recipe, she'd need to make five sets of ten. Upon being infused with mana, Migu leaves reinforce a living being's natural healing prowess. By cutting them into squares and placing them into cloth bags, the bandages would be complete.

Once infused with mana, the Migu leaves become adhesive. So they had to be pressed between pieces of cloth before being placed inside the cloth bag. That's why we had René with us.

"It turned out well! Let's work on the compress medicine next!"

"Mujimuji!"

Next came the compress medicine. It was a liquid medicine that was to be soaked into a dry cloth and pressed against a wound. Like a bandage, it was made by boiling Migu leaves and Duana flowers in 300cc of well water while pouring mana uniformly into the concoction...

"Ngggghhh..." Moné frowned.

"Hey, you're running out of mana."

"I-I know..."

Using mana through the Spherits means depleting the mana in one's body. To replenish it, one must take in mana from the Air, but that requires a special skill that was hard for humans to master.

But I'm here to help her out!

"Mujimuji!"

"Huh? Oh, my mana..." Moné muttered in surprise.

"Oh, did you do that, Mujimuji? You can use mana?" René asked me.

"Mujimuji!"

Of course I can! I might be an infant, but I'm still a Mythical Beast. A dragon, even if I am a weak one. It'd be a blow to my dignity if I couldn't!

"Wow, I have so much mana... I feel like Big Sis Tinaris!"

Maybe I gave her too much. Adjusting the amount of mana is hard... Either way, the amount of mana sent into the concoction remained steady, and the pot began to simmer.

The concoction let out an odd stench. We needed to wait for it to cool before we bottled it, so we put a lid on the pot for today.

The three compress medicines were complete.



THE next day, Moné and René woke up early and found the concoction nice and cold. René helped put it into bottles.

“I did it! Thanks, René! Mujimuji!”

“Don’t worry about it. Let’s get it to Nakona.”

“Mujimuji!”

We cleaned up Tinaris’s workshop and handed Moné’s work over to Nakona, who was sweeping the entrance hall. She used Appraisal magic to gauge the medicine’s quality. The bandage was of average quality, and the compress medicine was high quality.

“Yeah, I’d say you pass with aplomb.”

“Then...!”

“I contacted Tina yesterday, and she said that if you can clear this task, you’re good to use her garden. So here’s the key. Do you know what you need to take?”

“Yeah! Thanks!”

This meant Tina gave Moné permission to use her toetuls! Nakona contacting her ahead of time was highly appreciated. The three of us cheerfully made our way to the herb garden to collect the ingredients.

With that, we got the toetuls and the Duana, Lilith, and Solan flowers we needed. All that remained was the Rofola mushroom and the powdered Rofola Totoro fishbone. Thankfully, we could get the latter from the campsite.

Most of the fish swimming through the lake were Rofola Totoro fish. There were other kinds living in the lake, of course, but the Rofola Totoro was the most common. They were probably adapted to living in this lake’s water. People who loved fishing would occasionally catch Rofola Totoros half their size.

Marcus once said that Lake Rofola was home to the King of the Rofola Totoro, a fish capable of swallowing people whole. *But who knows if that’s true? Maybe it’s just a story to attract customers.*

“We came here to collect the fish bones!” Moné said, approaching the campsite with a ceramic bowl in hand.

The camping guests who were fishing there thankfully filled the bowl with the bones of the fish they caught. It wasn’t long

before she got the amount she needed. Moné thanked the guests and went to wash the bones. She then dried and crushed them into powder.

That just left the last ingredient—Rofola mushrooms. Gathering those was actually a bit difficult. Mount Rofola technically stretched over multiple large and small ridges, but it wasn't big enough to count as a mountain range. The inn really *was* built at the bottom of a gigantic mountain.

The Rofola mushrooms grew on the eighth ridge of what was considered the main mountain. In other words, near the peak. Going there would be very dangerous.

"So, what are we going to do about the Rofola shrooms?" René asked.

"Well, Big Sis Tinaris taught me there's a place you can find them without having to go as far as the eighth ridge! We can pick them there safely!"

"Huh, such a place exists? Where?"

"It's next to the hot spring. They grow in this moist cave near there."

"Then we can gather everything today."

"Yeah, let's go!"

"Mujimuji!"



AND so I followed the two of them to the hot springs halfway up Mount Rofola. This natural hot spring was open for guest use. It was quite popular. The road there was paved, and the bath was partitioned into a men's and women's section. Bathing in them had health benefits.

Tinaris had also had the idea to use pipes to direct hot water down into the inn. But there were still too many parts of the inn that needed renovating first.

The cave Moné had heard about was behind the hot springs. It was a very dark, damp place, suitable for raising mushrooms. The air felt a bit thin inside the cave's confined space. This cave probably resembled the environment near the mountain's peak, allowing the Rofola mushrooms to grow there.

But I could sense a vile presence inside...

“Mujimuji! Mujimuji!” I barked warningly.

“What’s wrong, Mujimuji? Let’s go,” Moné said.

“Mujimuji! Mujimuji!”

“What, you don’t like it here?”

“Mujimuji!”

That’s right! Moné, René, there’s something bad here!

Something was lying in wait in the cave. It was drawn in by all the people in the inn but couldn’t approach because of the monster-repelling barrier. It wasn’t very strong. But given they were powerless children, the twins couldn’t afford to go inside. They at least needed Nakona with them. But I couldn’t speak in a way humans could understand. My cries only came across as “mujimuji,” and no one would take me seriously.

“Don’t worry, Mujimuji!” Moné told me. “It’s kind of cold and damp in here, but I’m not scared! Oh, are you telling me not to slip? I won’t!”

“Mujimuji!”

No, that’s not what I mean!

“You’re too overprotective, Mujimuji,” René chided me. “C’mon, let’s look for those shrooms. How many do we need?”

“Five should be enough!”

“Five, huh...?”

“Mujimuji...”

Oh, fine.... Let’s not go too deep. We can gather what we need and get out...

“...It’s getting darker,” Moné noted as we advanced deeper in.

“But the stones in the ceiling are shining and wet, so we can keep going... Why are they glowing?” René asked.

“Um, I think it’s because there’s this shining mineral called Rofola ore in there... Uncle Marcus told me about it. He said it stops glowing when exposed to outside air, so it’s useless.”

“Huh...”

Mother once told me that Rofola ore was formed when the mana used by the Elf of the Sun in an ancient war had settled into this cave and seeped into the bedrock.

Once it makes contact with the outside air, the Spherits absorb the mana within them back into the Air, which depletes the ore’s mana reserves, making them lose their ability to generate light. Having light in the cave was very helpful, but I couldn’t relax. There was no telling when the vile thing inside the cave might

notice us. I was eager for us to return.

“Ah, here it is!” Moné exclaimed.

“Which one?” René asked.

“This one!”

She pointed at a blue-capped mushroom growing in between the rocks. My Appraisal magic told me it was indeed a Rofola mushroom. We even found two at the same time. That just left three more.

I snuffled the air. The mushrooms had the smell of iron mixed into their regular raw scent, making them quite distinct.

“Mujimuji.”

“You’re helping us look, Mujimuji? Thanks!”

No need for thanks, Moné. I just want to leave this dreadful place as soon as we can!

I couldn’t smell any mushrooms directly around us. But there were some a few feet away...

Sniff, sniff...

“Muji! Mujimuji!” I signaled Moné.

“Oh, here! Thanks, Mujimuji! There’s another one!”

“That’s three. Just two more.”

I couldn’t smell any more mushrooms in our direct vicinity. Maybe we should’ve returned to the entrance to see if we were overlooking any.

“No more...? Maybe we should go deeper in?” Moné asked.

“We probably can’t go in too deep,” René remarked. “It’s just a straight path, but the ground’s so scraggy... We’d have nowhere to hide, too.”

“What’s wrong with you, René?” Moné asked. “Why are you so scared? There’s a monster-repelling barrier set up around the area. We’ll be fine!”

No, no, no! Once you’re past the hot spring, you’re outside the barrier, Moné! It’s dangerous here! I can feel something really vile ahead! Oooh, if only I could tell you!

“Anyway, we can’t go any further. Big Sis Nakona would get mad at us!” René implored her.

“Grr! You’re worrying too much! We’ve got Mujimuji with us. We’ll be fine!”

“It’s dangerous even with Mujimuji here! Did you forget how that zombie chased us?!”

“Ah...!” Moné froze up.

W-Well said, René! You're a responsible big brother!

"F-Fine..." Moné said, seemingly giving up.

"We can check by the entrance again," René comforted her.

"Mujimuji!" I cried out.

"Whoa! What's wrong, Mujimuji?"

"Mujiji..." I growled.

I was wrong! I was so occupied with the back of the cave, I forgot to pay attention to the entrance. I jumped to the twins' side and growled menacingly.

Five people... No, seven, eight... Fifteen people?!

René's eyes narrowed in realization, too.

"Huh? What? What's going on?!" Moné squealed.

"Back away, Moné, and stay behind me," René whispered.

"R-René?"

I continued growling, warning the two. I heard metallic sounds ahead of us, but whoever these people were, they were masking their footsteps. That was why I didn't notice them. Their stench was foul, though... It made the smell in the cave decent by comparison.

A group of smug bandits appeared, rusted swords in their hands.

This is bad...

We were completely cut off, since we couldn't head to the back of the cave either. I had to do something...!

"Heheheh. Finally, some new prey..." one of the bandits said upon noticing us.

"The chick in that inn is too strong, after all. They'll make for fine hostages," another said.

"Tch...!" René clicked his tongue.

"B-Bandits...!" Moné whined.

I can't let them go deeper into the cave, though! What can I do...?

"Moné, run!" René told her.

"Where?!"

"Go deeper in! It might lead outside!"

"O-Okay!"

"Mujimuji!" I squealed in alarm.

N-No! You can't go deeper in! It's too dangerous!

But they didn't understand my warning. The threat right in front of them was that much more vivid. The two turned around and ran. But the cave floor was rocky and hard to move on, and their short limbs meant they weren't very quick.

The bandits sneered and jeered at them, only having to walk normally to keep up with the little ones. That only scared them that much more.

Those bandits' expressions. Those eyes that clearly enjoyed torturing and toying with their prey. It was a cruel reminder of the time the zombie chased us.

"No, please, no! Someone help us!" Moné whispered as René led her by the arm.

And it stirred my memory, too. Of the day I'd met Moné and started living with these twins. Through no fault of their own, their parents had died, and they'd been put in danger because of a terrible power.

Why? These children haven't harmed a soul. They deserved a peaceful, safe life. Why do sinless children have to be chased around like this? This is unforgivable. Utterly inexcusable.

Moné and René's parents weren't vile people, either. They had the kindness to care for their children and the courage to lay down their lives for them.

So why? Why? Why do the sinless have to suffer?

—Because they're powerless?

That's foolish. They're meant to be trampled under ruthless absurdity for no other reason than they were weak?

No...!

"Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!" A nasal growl reached my ears.

Moné and René froze up. A black clump crept out of the darkness of the cavern. It was shaped like a lizard. A long tongue was slithering in and out of its mouth, and its red eyeballs were fixed on us.

The bandits caught up to us and then let out a startled gasp upon seeing the monster. They turned around to run.

That was it. Everything was for naught. *Monsters focus on places full of people, so no matter what we do, it'll attack us first.*

"M-Mujimuji, take Moné and run! I'll distract it!" René said.

What?!

"René?!" Moné exclaimed.

"It's the only way! If you leave the cave, you can hide in the hot springs, and the guests should come there! Now go!"

"No! René!"

“Mujimuji, please watch over those two.”

Seeing him run off was like seeing them again. Those two parents, sacrificing themselves for their children. He looked exactly like they had that night.

But didn't they ask you, Mujimuji...? Didn't they ask you to watch over them? Didn't you promise their parents that YOU would be the one to watch over their children? Why aren't you protecting them? Will you leave one of them to die to save the other?

No. It'd just be a repetition of what happened. Another kind human will die. This human continent is all too cruel.

“_____”

Mother. Oh, Air. Grant me just a sliver of your power for this one moment. I cannot stand this absurdity. In that case...let me become a force of absurdity myself!

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Nnghaaaaaa!”

All the Air in the cave reacted. I took it all in, temporarily evolving my body. A long tail with a viper's head. Hard scales. A body the color of poison. The hind legs of a bird and the front legs of a beast. And two curled horns upon my head.

The cave felt cramped. My body grew in size, and the tip of my nose knocked the monster to the back of the cave.

“Mujimuji?!” Moné looked at me with wide eyes.

“Get behind me and on my back,” I told her.

“You can talk?!” both she and René said in surprise.

I crouched on the cave's floor. The two of them climbed on my back, questioning all the while if I really was Mujimuji. With them atop me, I began pacing backward, with my stomach pressed against the ground.

My word! I didn't expect to become so long and large. This cave feels so cramped...

“You're...really Mujimuji? It's really you, right?”

“I am a Mythical Beast named Mushufushu. By absorbing the ancient Air in this cave, I've been able to temporarily assume a mature form. Once we leave the cave, I will return to my former form.”

“Mushufushu...?”

“You can keep calling me Mujimuji. I do not mind.”

The Mushufushu is a type of dragon Mythical Beast. A poisonous dragon, seen as a vile creature. In my infant form, I had

very little venom in me. But in this form, I could breathe a nearly endless current of toxic miasma.

Of course, I wouldn't, for that could kill René and Moné.

"Gyaaaaaaah!"

"M-Monster!"

"Mm?"

I could hear a few men screaming behind me. *The bandits from earlier.* I made the snake head on my tail snap at them, forcing them to run away.

Yes, run! Run with your tails between your legs. Or else I'll crush you under my belly. Go on! Flee!

"Hmph..."

We finally left the cave. I used magic to observe our surroundings, and the bandits had already run far away from the cave. They were good at running, if nothing else.

"Mujimuji..." Moné sounded anxious.

"Right. In this form..."

"Mujimuji?"

"Hold onto me tightly."

"Huh?" the twins uttered in unison.

As poison dragons, the Mushufushu have no wings and can't fly. But we *can* use flight magic. Since the Air on this continent was so polluted, using magic was a bit of a challenge. But with my current form, it wouldn't be an issue.

I was impressed with my mature form. *This is what being an adult feels like.* And with that emotion, I took flight—carrying the two of them to the eighth ridge, near the peak of Mount Rofola.

"Where are we?" René asked.

"You didn't collect enough Rofola mushrooms, right? They should be growing around here. Go and pick some."

I let the two scramble off my back and jerked my snout in the direction of some mushrooms I'd found using detection magic.

"Ah!" Moné exclaimed.

The two of them still looked a bit anxious. But they ran over, collected the Rofola mushrooms, and came back. I carried them again. But, just as I was about to drop them off near the inn...

"Get down," I ordered them suddenly.

"Why?"

"I'm sorry. My time's run out."

I could only maintain this mature form for a short while. I

landed on the flower field halfway up the mountain, put the twins down, and closed my eyes. I could feel the Air drain from my body.

“Mujimuji?!” Moné asked me, alarmed.

“I’m sorry I’m so weak. But I’ll always watch over you two and make sure you’re happy. I promised...your parents I would—”

My body shrunk. I probably wouldn’t be able to talk anymore. So I had to tell them that, at the very end. And then I reverted to my original form. The weak, tiny form of a child. A form that couldn’t speak. Or defend them.

I felt so pathetic. *Why can’t I be stronger?*

“Mujimuji!” Moné cried.

“Mujimujiiii!” I replied.

Moné latched onto me as soon as I returned to my old form. *Ah, but...my small form can curl up in her arms. And that’s something my bigger form could never do.*

“...Thank you, Mujimuji,” she said, burying her face into my fur.

“Thank you! And I’m sorry you had to force yourself for us...”

“Mujimuji!” René said, petting me.

I didn’t force myself at all. Your parents left you in my care, after all. I’ll protect you with my body and the very essence of my being. After all, that’s my purpose in life.



Moné stirred the alchemy pot. She’d put all the ingredients inside, and I watched them brew as I helped her pour in mana. I prayed it would be successful.

A little later, a small sparkly light rose from the concoction.

“I-It’s ready!” Moné said.

“Mujimuji!”

“Let’s bottle it up,” René said.

“Thanks!”

Moné lay down exhausted, and I carried her back to the main building on my back, which I could still do in my smaller form. She didn’t have much mana—which was standard for a human. She just needed to master the mana recovery technique. If she didn’t, she’d need me to constantly supplement mana for her, and she’d probably still deplete her own reserves and fall unconscious.

Thankfully, René had learned some cooling magic, allowing him to chill the fluid in the pot and put it in a bottle. He'd probably looked up a magic book and learned it on his own while Moné and I were looking for ingredients.

It was actually quite impressive. He hadn't just learned magic from one of the basic elements, like fire and water, but started from an advanced element like ice. *He might have some unexpected talent as a mage.*

Moné took the rest of the day off while René bottled the medicine. The next day, Moné handed the finished medicine to Sax.

"So...this is the hormone adjustment medicine...?" he asked.

"For one dose, take a spoonful of the medicine and have her drink it with a glass of water. Three times a day, morning, noon, and night. It's strong medicine, so don't let her drink it more often than that. If you follow those instructions, her hormone balance should start stabilizing within a week, and the morning sickness should become a bit better. It'll only lighten the symptoms. And if your doctor tells her to stop taking the medicine, do as he says."

"Okay. For now, we'll try this. If it goes well, I'll come buy some more. Is that all right with you?"

"And when you do, I'll make you more."

"Thank you!"

After that explanation, Moné sent Sax on his way. Would it help his wife get better? Who knew? But Moné really had become more responsible. It was a heartwarming sight.

"I hope his wife gets better," Nakona said, patting Moné's shoulders from behind.

"Yeah," she said, a satisfied smile on her lips.

She really *had* worked hard. Her effort was genuine and I couldn't be prouder.

"But that part about you making him more if he shows up again might've been a bit hasty," René noted.

"I-I mean..."

"That's right," Nakona said, her voice a bit cold. "You ran into trouble out there, didn't you?"

"Ugh..." the twins groaned guiltily.

They didn't break their promise. But the fact Moné hadn't heeded René's advice and got us all into trouble was true. One wrong step, and they could've been captured by those ne'er-dowells and sent to Edesa Kura as slaves. Moné was a bit careless, and

she should learn from that. That much was for certain!

"But I never thought Mujimuji was actually a Mythical Beast named Mushufushu," Nakona continued. "I mean, we knew you weren't a normal animal, but yeah..."

"Yeah, Mujimuji is a Mythical Beast. That's awesome!" Moné said.

"Mujimuji!"

Heheh, I'm not just any Mythical. I'm a child of the current ruler of the Mythical Beasts, King Curalius!

Of course, my mature form wasn't something I could take *that* much pride in. A poison dragon that spews out toxins... I could restrain myself from releasing it, of course, but I wasn't the kind of creature meant to live in tandem with other living beings.

When I became an adult, I'd have to return to the Mythical continent. When that time came, I'd have to bid Moné and René farewell...though they'd probably have passed away by then. *So don't you worry, parents. I'll protect your kids until the end. Watch over us until then.*

"So that means someday you'll be that big and strong again?" René asked me a little rudely.

"Mujimuji."

"I don't think we'll have enough food to feed you. What do we do then, Big Sis Nakona?"

"He gets *that* big?" Nakona asked.

"As big as this inn."

"Seriously...? I guess we'll have to keep him outside. Ughhhh, I hope it won't be a huge blow to our food budget... Maybe we should have Renge take him back to the Mythical continent next time he comes over."

"M-Muji?!"

I can't have that, Nakona! I still need to watch over those two until they've lived their lives to the fullest and passed on!

"I'm joking. Renge said that once Mythicals mature, they can assume human form. So, we can just see how things develop."

"Really?!" The twins asked.

"Mujimuji?!"

Really!? I asked too.

If I could assume a human form when I grew up...I'd be able to stay by Moné's side all the time, just like Master Renge!

"Then I'll be able to talk to Mujimuji?!" Moné asked excitedly.

“I...guess so?”

“Yay, that’s great! Mujimuji, you have to grow up fast!”

“M-Mujimuji!”

Yes, I guess I have to give it my all and grow up fast! If I could assume human form and not spew toxic miasma everywhere, that’d be wonderful! I’ll work hard to grow up... But...how do you grow up, again?

I’m sure that once I grow stronger, I’ll be a bit closer to being an adult. I’ll just have to train! Train harder! I’ll live strong and bold!

I’ll live with strength!

♣Afterword

HELLO, everyone. My name is Kiri Komori. A pleasure to see you all again. Thank you very much for picking up volume 3 of *Reincarnated as the Last of my Kind*!

I would like to take this chance to thank everyone who read and supported this book. To the editors who reached out to me. To Yamigo, for their wonderful illustrations. To Roman Lempert, who handled the translation. To everyone involved with the production of the eBook. And to the family who's always supported me.

Thank you all so, so much.

Volume 3 is the point when the story springs into action all at once. How did you like it? This time, I decided to add a new chapter from the perspective of the mysterious creature Mujimuji. I'll admit seeing the way Yamigo drew him for Volume 2 might have tickled my inspiration!

Originally, I intended to reveal Mujimuji's identity in one of the web novel's extra stories. But I ended up finishing the main story first and kind of lost the drive to write more. That left that strand of the story hanging until now. I've mentioned it briefly in Volume 2's afterword, so allow me to mention it here as well! In terms of content, the story is set to reach its conclusion in Volume 5. So, I'd be pleased if you could keep supporting us until the end!

Print volumes of the series are set to start coming out this year. I asked for a physical release so the series can reach more people, and now the hardcover version of Volume 1 is out as of this volume's release! The release date for the next volumes will be announced on Cross Infinite World's homepage, so please keep an eye out for that!

Once again, thank you for picking up this series!

—Kiri Komori



THE WEREWOLF COUNT AND THE TRICKSTER TAILOR

STORY BY: YURUKA MORISAKI
ILLUSTRATION BY: TSUKITO
VOL. 1 / OUT NOW

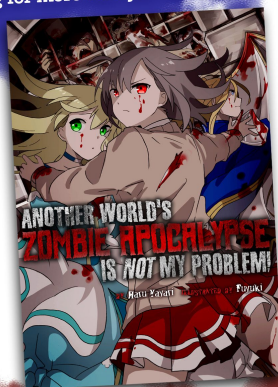
"I don't care if you are a man, let me court you."

Rock's whole life is shaken when a werewolf shows up at her shop in the middle of the night...asking for more than just clothes!

ANOTHER WORLD'S ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE IS NOT MY PROBLEM!

STORY BY: HARU YAYARI
ILLUSTRATION BY: FUYUKI
STANDALONE / OUT NOW

Just when I thought navigating high school was bad enough, I woke up to a rotting, post-apocalyptic world!



OF DRAGONS AND FAE: IS A FAIRY TALE ENDING POSSIBLE FOR THE PRINCESS'S HAIRSTYLIST?

STORY BY: TSUKASA MIKUNI
ILLUSTRATION BY: YUKIKANA
STANDALONE / OUT NOW

After being dumped by a dragon knight, Mayna sets out to prove that fairytale endings aren't only for princesses! See how this royal hairstylist wins over the dragon kingdom one head of hair at a time!



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APOCALYPSE BRINGER MYNOGHRA

STORY BY: FEHU KAZUNO
ILLUSTRATION BY: JUN
SERIES / VOL 1 OUT NOW

Takuto reincarnates into his favorite strategy game as the commander of an evil civilization! Will his kingdom building strategies prove just as good in a real world?

**HELLO, I AM A WITCH AND
MY CRUSH WANTS ME TO
MAKE A LOVE POTION!**
STORY BY: EIKO MUTSUHANA
ILLUSTRATION BY: VIENT
SERIES / VOL 1 & 2 OUT NOW

This is the heartwarming story of a shut-in witch and an arrogant, straight-laced knight whose romance starts from a love potion.



THE WEAKEST MANGA VILLAINESS WANTS HER FREEDOM!

STORY BY: KAZUKI KARASAWA
ILLUSTRATION BY: MASAMI
STANDALONE / OUT NOW

Oh, crud, I just realized that I've been reincarnated into my favorite manga as the first boss defeated by the heroine at the start of the story!



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